

# THE IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM

## WAR AND CONFLICT: NEW PERSPECTIVES IN THE NORTH

Jim Forrester

The Imperial War Museum (IWM) is the UK's national museum of recent war and conflict. Set up in 1917 to collect and display material relating to the Great War, its remit was then extended at the start of the Second World War to cover both world wars and was finally extended once more in 1953 to include all military operations in which Britain and the Commonwealth have been involved since 1914. As a national museum, it has collected, archived and displayed material relating to countless people, both from Britain and the Commonwealth involved in or affected by those conflicts. It is a museum of social and community history which gathers in a wide range of contemporary and historical stories and material culture, and is constantly adding to the collections as new conflicts unfold. It holds remarkably diverse collections spanning tanks and aircraft, personal letters and documents, films, photos and sound recordings, along with some of the country's best-known paintings.

The main Imperial War Museum moved to its current home in the former Bethlem Royal Hospital in Southwark in 1938, and it has been complemented for many years by the Cabinet War Rooms in Whitehall, HMS Belfast on the Thames, and Duxford Airfield in Cambridgeshire. However, for around seventeen years the Trustees of IWM held firm to the idea that they should open a branch further north, so bringing the remarkable collections of IWM to the potential audiences of the Midlands and the North.

Imperial War Museum North (IWMN) in Trafford, the fifth and newest branch of the organisation, is the manifestation of that long-held aim. Built in two and a half years at a cost of £30 million, and opened on 5 July 2002, the museum received over 600,000 visitors in the first eighteen months and has already become the centre for curriculum-linked educational and cultural activity around war and conflict for thousands of students and schoolchildren across the region.



Imperial War Museum North

### The Trafford Site

Although planning in the 1990s had steered the Trustees towards Hartlepool, a change of circumstances there forced a rethink and the museum team trawled once again, coming up with a list of 38 possible sites for the new building. A rigorous assessment process eventually led to the south side of the Manchester Ship canal in the Metropolitan Borough of Trafford, opposite the Lowry Arts Centre which was then under construction on the redundant land that had once been the Port of Manchester.

To envisage the Lowry on this site had required a remarkable level of vision and foresight on the part of Salford City Council and those who were advising and working with them. To then consider adding another cultural venue to the mix required the certainty of vision that the cultural offer would form the heart of any regeneration scheme. When the sites were chosen, there was little of the existing infrastructure around other than the phased housing and office developments on Salford Quays. The pulling power of large, complementary museums and galleries was seen with great clarity at the Albert Dock in Liverpool during the 1980s, when the Tate opened their northern branch alongside the burgeoning Merseyside Maritime Museum. Visitors to these two museums delivered the steady stream required to give life and purpose to an area which had yet to discover the audiences it currently attracts through its mixture of apartments, offices, bars, restaurants and shops. The same vision of a cultural axis starting off a chain reaction of regeneration has also happened at the Quays in Trafford and Salford.

Having identified the site, the IWM team set up an architectural competition that eventually led them to the remarkable Daniel Libeskind and his practice based in Berlin. Having just completed the building for the Jewish Museum there, he had proved that his concepts for expressive, inventive buildings could not only be built but that they would provide fascinating and thought-provoking environments in which to mount displays and exhibitions. Libeskind's own family history was massively affected by war, his parents having met on a long journey east after both being released from labour camps at the end of the Second World War. Dozens of his family members were lost through the Holocaust and these influences surely contributed to his concept of a building that represented a world shattered by conflict. The beautiful interlocking shards constructed of steel, and clad in aluminium, have become a landmark on the Quays around Trafford Park, with many acknowledging it as world-class architecture. Libeskind has recently won the architectural competition to design the replacement building for the World Trade Center in New York and is also designing museums and galleries from Toronto to Hong Kong. He summarised the design process at the time of the opening of IWM North in July 2002:

*When I began to work on the competition for the Imperial War Museum North, I was deeply challenged by the notion of creating a place that was at once intimate and civic. A place in which the story of the significance, sacrifice, tragedy and destiny of conflict can come alive. My aim was to create a building, not only intelligently programmed for the events which were to take place in it, but one which emotionally moved the soul of the visitor toward a sometimes unexpected realization. Conflict is not simply a story with a happy or unhappy ending, but an ongoing momentum that structures one's understanding of the future in relation to the past.*

*In order to touch the passions of the visitor, and structure a building that is boldly put together, I designed a building that is emblematic of the earth shattered by conflict. As the visitor moves through this splintered globe with its fragmented curvatures, there is a feeling of vulnerability.*

*It is important to realize that a Museum which is to depict the ongoing implication of past conflicts into present day fears must still be a place that has dignity, elegance and magnetism - qualities offering the visitor unique sensations, ones not to be confused with negativity or simulation.*

*The building's completion depends upon the visitors' participation and interest, be it in having a cup of coffee, buying a book, perusing the landscape, viewing the panorama of the city or being engaged in the time line of history. These programmatic activities are given three-dimensional depth, not in neutral containers, but in functional and emblematic spaces, each of which has a density, materiality, temperature, acoustical quality, atmosphere and gravity which are not fully accessible to the abstraction of words, but rather to concretely embodied experience. Whatever the experience might be for each individual, the Museum has the simplicity in construction and the complexity in architecture that parallels the simplicity of news images and the complexity of modern warfare.*

*An architecture that is strong yet open, precise yet subtle, serious yet fun is a contribution to public discourse. I hope that this building will enable the Imperial War Museum North to accomplish its mission of inspiring, involving and educating its audiences.*

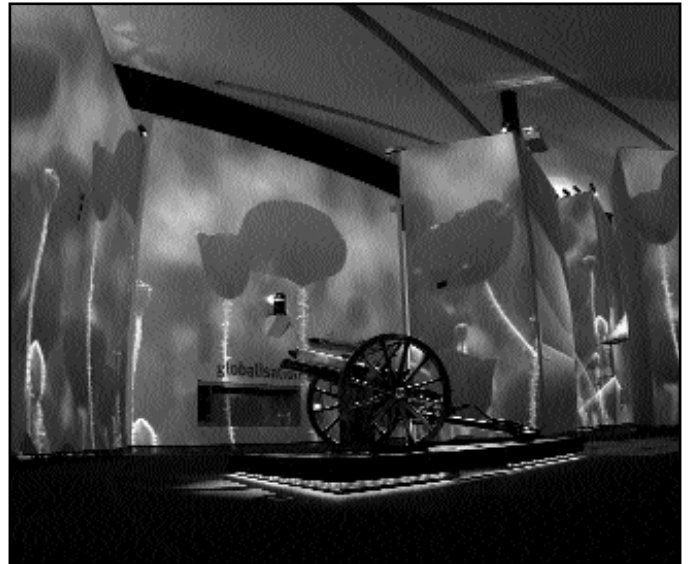
Alongside the process of selecting an architect and agreeing the design of the building, it was essential to secure sufficient funding for the project. The outcome of protracted discussions and bids to find these funds was that a local development company, Peel Holdings, who had acquired the Manchester Ship Canal in the 1990s, agreed to provide 40% of the funds, the remainder coming from European Regional Development Funds, Trafford Council, the North West Development Agency, English Partnerships and the IWM itself.

The ground was cut in January 2000 and the building took shape over the following two years with the exhibition fit-out beginning in November 2001, aiming for a target completion

date of July 2002 just before the Commonwealth Games. With a radical design for the building in hand, the project team based in London were determined to arrive at a memorable and unusual solution to the main displays that was true to the remit of the Imperial War Museum to record and relate how war has affected people's lives. Analysis of the wide-ranging collections at IWM led towards the photography and sound archives that contain masses of unseen or unheard material. Working to a brief to use the building to the full, the team involved Event Communications Ltd to devise the large-scale projections known as the Big Picture that form the heart of the experience. After trials in an east London warehouse, the projection system developed to incorporate 60 slide projectors firing onto 20 screens delivering a synchronised sound and image 'essay' on chosen themes. Of the myriad subjects that were considered, the three 15-minute shows that were eventually chosen were, 'Why War?', 'Weapons of War' and 'Children and War'. Other shows will follow with the next planned for 2005 on the subject of how war has altered and changed life in the North.

## Displays and Exhibitions

Few who see the dramatic Big Picture presentations can fail to be moved by them, particularly in view of the size and positioning of the screens. They form the starting point for many of the discussions led by the team of Interactors who staff the galleries at selected times and deliver a mixture of performances, guided tours, handling sessions and schools programmes. In

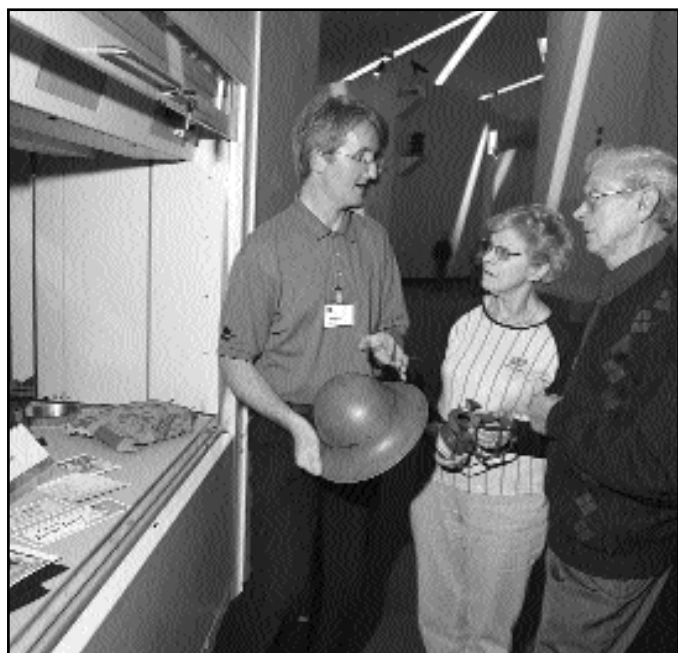


**Poppies in Big Picture presentation**

response to research with schools and colleges, the main gallery also features a 220-metre Timeline from 1900 to the present day. The century is broken up into sections, each headlined by stripped-down texts which seek to encapsulate the key points of the period. These are then developed through wall-cases, texts and images on light-boxes to relay more information on the macro- or microevents. The Timeline also incorporates video footage on monitors along with the databases for the First and Second World Wars from the Commonwealth War Graves Commission.

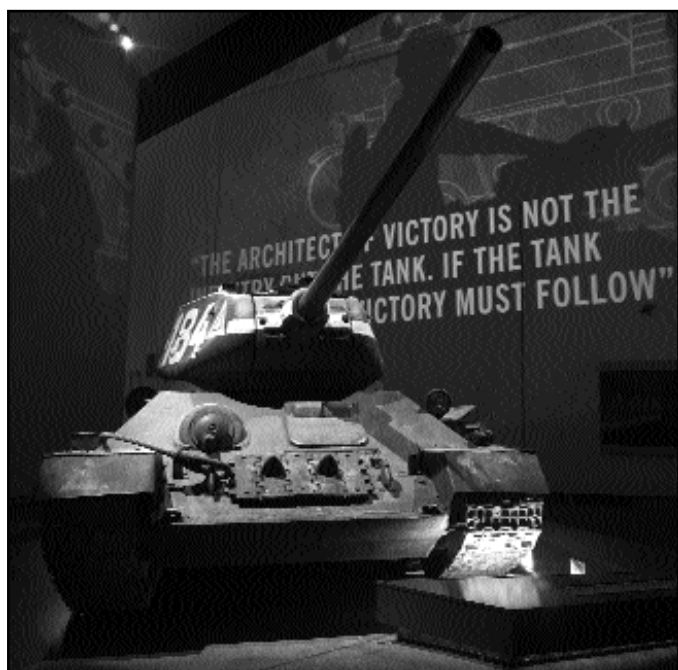
Behind the screenwalls of the large structures in the Main Exhibition Space, the project team created six themed silo exhi-

bitions covering Experiences, Women, Media, the Commonwealth, Science and the Legacy of war. Each designed in an individual style, these silos draw visitors in from the Timeline and can be studied whilst the Big Picture is running. Built into the external walls of the silos is another innovative feature, the TimeStacks: adapted from industry, these two computerised vertical storage machines allow small, inexpensive displays to be set out on large trays which can then be summoned by visitors through selection buttons. The machine



**TimeStack handling**

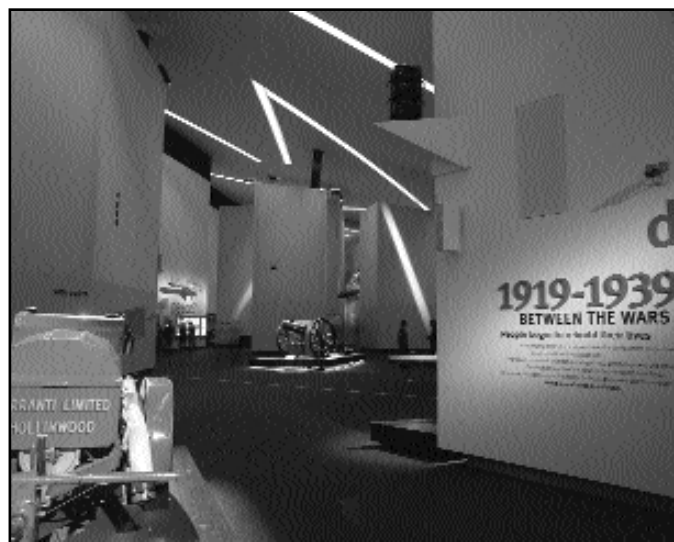
stacks away the previous tray and then pulls out the next as requested. In addition to maximising the use of space, the TimeStacks are highly versatile and can be used to reflect current or recent events. Trays in current use include Bevan Boys, Animals in Wartime, Trench Art and the Second Gulf war in Iraq.



**T34 Russian Tank**

With expectations for large hardware high on the list for some visitors, a range of large objects was selected, each carrying important symbolism of a different period. Visitors are greeted by a Harrier Jump Jet mounted on a pedestal, resembling a model on a bedroom windowsill even though it is full-size. As an example of the remarkable and ingenious technology created to fight wars, the British-built Harrier is notable for having been bought by US forces who previously only sourced their aircraft within the USA. Further into the gallery is the Field Gun which fired the first shot on the British side in the First World War, so signifying the start of the devastating conflict to follow. At the far end of the space, a Russian T34 tank is an icon of the Eastern Front in the Second World War and continued to be used by the Russians in theatres of war such as Afghanistan. Further larger objects are being added in 2004, including the last remaining searchlight from the Berlin wall and a Leopard Patrol vehicle from former Rhodesia.

The overlay of different layers of interpretation in the Main Exhibitions was intended to be a rich cocktail of information, some of which, such as the Big Picture, is made readily accessible and others which need more work from visitors. Since the projections require neutral surfaces, the overall effect can appear sparse at first glance, but with over 1,200 objects in the space and a variety of means of delivery, the displays reward those with a taste for discovery and who are looking for a more challenging and broad-ranging approach to the subject.

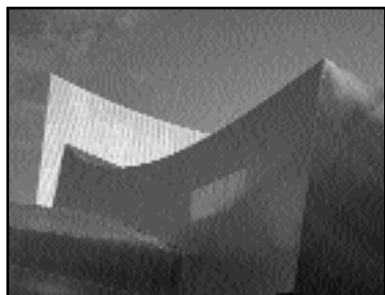


**Fire Tender**

## Visiting the Museum

A visit to the museum starts with arrival through Libeskind's 55-metre Airshard with a viewing platform at 29 metres from which visitors can get a 360-degree view out over the Quays, the Cities of Salford and Manchester and Trafford Park, the largest concentration of industrial premises in the UK. The location of the museum on the edge of Trafford Park is significant in that it was a heavily-targeted area during the Second World War. Best-known perhaps for building Lancaster bombers, the Park was expressly targeted by the Luftwaffe seeking to damage the industrial war effort, and reconnaissance photos show the site of the museum, then a timber and oil depot, being assessed for possible attack.

Moving into the building, visitors pass through the entrance areas which are used for a range of smaller art and sculpture exhibitions and which also house the shop and general visitor facilities, and climb the irregular staircase or take the lift to the upper level. The choice there is between the Main Exhibition Space as described above, the WaterShard Restaurant, which sits in the third shard representing a flipped-over fragment of the globe and with dramatic views out over the Ship Canal, or the Special Exhibition Gallery. This gallery is home to a rolling programme of exhibitions that, in 2004, will include Stanley



**View of the WaterShard**

Spencer's *Shipbuilding* series of paintings commissioned as War Art in the 1940s and painted in the shipyards of Port Glasgow, followed by an exhibition on sport in wartime, *The Greater Game*. Paintings from the Imperial War Museum's remarkable and rich collections of First World War art will then follow this and in 2005, to mark the 60th anniversary of VE and VJ Days, an exhibition on War and the North will cover the massive effort, disruption and change that came about in northern Britain as a result of twentieth-century war and conflict.

### **Educational Programmes and Community Links**

The museum was always conceived as a hub for learning that would stimulate thought and discussion on the subject of war and conflict. Educational programmes were researched and devised to line up with the National Curriculum not only in history but in science, art and citizenship too. From the beginning the team aimed to offer a variety of different learning outcomes - open-ended, challenging, appealing to all the senses - and set out to provide a public environment combined with a fully integrated learning, events and exhibition programme to provide accessible interpretation and encourage active participation and 'ownership'. The initial research and outreach work undertaken over the two years before the museum opened led to the creation of a free CD-ROM guide for formal educators. This guide includes a raft of resources for pre-, inter- and post-visit for all ages and levels and the CD-ROM is soon to be transferred to the IWM web site so it can more easily be updated and new resources added.

In view of the fact that the museum was springing up from the ground in a short time and needed strong links with the local community, it was decided at an early stage that it could benefit in a number of ways from the involvement of volunteers and that it presented an opportunity to explore new ways of working with them. Drawing on support from the European Social Fund and the Learning and Skills Council, the team devised a scheme which would provide volunteers from specific groups in society with the opportunity to undertake an NVQ Level 2 in return for

their time and help running the museum. This programme encourages links with the community, develops local audiences who are unlikely to visit the museum, and also provides the volunteers (lone parents, young people at risk of exclusion, those returning to work, people with disabilities and those from ethnic minority backgrounds) with transferable vocational skills and recognised qualifications. These people have become ambassadors for the Museum in the local communities as well as being a very useful and informative focus group for testing out the Museum and its interpretation/learning services.

### **Conclusion**

In summary, IWM North is a new expression of IWM's existing remit to record, collect, interpret and display the wider community history surrounding war and conflict involving Britain and Commonwealth countries since 1900. It is a museum that commemorates the skill, courage and sacrifice of so many people, whilst also remembering the hardship, anguish and fear that accompanies war. It seeks to do this through a building that embodies the message 'war shapes lives', by mounting challenging and innovative displays and exhibitions, by running a learning programme for learners of all ages, and by staging events, discussions and performances linked to the core themes. It is an evolving museum that will grow and change both in response to ideas from visitors, staff and volunteers but also as a result of world events which will almost certainly involve new ways of waging war with unknown consequences for all. We aim to record the continuing effect on people's lives and to convey this back to the museum's visitors, researchers and learners in the North.

### **Contact Details**

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Trafford Park  
Manchester M17 1TZ

### **Opening Times**

March - October 10am - 6pm  
November - February 10am - 5pm  
(Closed 24, 25, 26 December)

Admission: Free  
General enquiries: 0161-836 4000  
Fax: 0161-836 4012  
Email: [info@iwm.org.uk](mailto:info@iwm.org.uk)  
Website: <http://north.iwm.org.uk>

Baby changing areas, pushchair access.