



Empire & Commonwealth

The Imperial War Museum

On 5th March 2007, the Imperial War Museum reached its 90th anniversary. On the IWM intranet that day, staff were reminded that in its ninety years' existence the Museum, "has seen two World wars, three main London sites, four branches, five director-generals and nearly 60 million visitors."

Founded in 1917 at the time when the fortunes of Britain and her allies in the First World War were at a low ebb, the Museum's aim was to record and commemorate the war and contribution made by the peoples of Britain and her empire to the Allied war effort. By March 1917, almost everyone in Britain had been touched, directly or indirectly, by the conflict, whether on the battlefield or working for the war effort on the home front. Britain itself was under increasing attack both from the air by zeppelins and aeroplane bombers and on the sea from German U boats. And by 1917, countless British homes were mourning the loss of a loved one.

It was Sir Alfred Mond, the First Commissioner of Works in David Lloyd George's coalition government, who was the driving force behind the establishment of the museum. Its initial name was the "National War Museum", but the massive contribution being made by the Dominions of Australia, Canada, New Zealand and South Africa, and by India and the colonies, led to it being re-titled the "Imperial War Museum". A committee was established to oversee the creation of the museum, and collecting began almost at once. Posters, documents, photographs and works of art were all collected, but especial emphasis was placed on the acquisition of 3-dimensional objects from the battlefields of the Western Front and the "sideshow". Public appeals were made for material, including one for portraits of service personnel which resulted in the Museum receiving over 100,000 photographs.



Imperial War Museum
London.
IWM Ref: TPYF

HISTORICAL NOTES

PERSONAL STORIES

TEACHING ACTIVITIES

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The Museum and its governing body, the Board of Trustees, were formally established by an Act of Parliament in 1920. But for many years the Museum, the staff of which were nearly all veterans of the war, had no proper home. There were plans for a custom-built museum by the River Thames where the Ministry of Defence stands today, but these fell through. Instead, for its first four years, from June 1920, the IWM was housed at the Crystal Palace, in South London, where an amazing 94,179 people visited on August Bank Holiday 1920.

In 1924, the Museum moved to cramped quarters at the Imperial Institute, South Kensington. It remained there for the next 11 years before moving to a permanent home at its present location in Lambeth, where it was formally opened by the Duke of York, (later King George VI), on 7th July 1936.

The Museum's new home was the building of the former Bethlehem Royal Hospital, known as "Bedlam", a hospital for people with mental health problems. The Hospital had originally been founded in 1247 and moved to Lambeth in 1815. There it remained until 1926 when it re-located to Beckenham, Kent.

In common with other museums and galleries, the Imperial War Museum closed to the public in late August 1939 under the threat of a new world war. Preparations for the possible outbreak of war had begun at the Museum as far back as November 1933, with plans to evacuate some of the collections to the countryside. The Museum re-opened in January 1940, but closed again with the start of the London "Blitz" in September 1940. Already, after Dunkirk, the armed forces had taken back into service 18 guns from the Museum's collection, while trench clubs and steel helmets went to equip the Home Guard.

During the course of the war, the Museum was badly damaged by both conventional bombing and by the "V" weapons. The most serious "incident" took place on 31st January 1941 when the Museum's Naval Gallery received a direct hit, wrecking the Short seaplane that had flown at the Battle of Jutland and damaging some model ships. The damage sustained was such that it was not until 27th November 1946 that the Museum, its terms of reference now expanded to also cover the Second World War, reopened to the public. In 1953, with the Korean War just ended, those terms of reference were expanded again to include all conflict which had involved Britain and the Commonwealth since August 1914. In more recent times they have expanded yet again with the active collecting of materials on "The War on Terror", Iraq and Afghanistan.



Imperial War Museum
North.
IWM Ref: TPYF





The Imperial War Museum has expanded as well, both physically and geographically. In 1976, it formally acquired Duxford Airfield in Cambridgeshire, and two years later HMS *Belfast*, a cruiser that had seen action in the Second World War and Korea. In 1984, the Cabinet War Rooms in Whitehall were opened to the public and in 2005, the Churchill Museum opened on the same site. Plans for a northern branch of the Museum came to fruition in 2002 when IWM North was opened at Trafford, near Manchester.

The Museum's collections now include:

Over 15,000 paintings, drawings and sculptures and 30,000 posters

Objects ranging from aircraft, armoured fighting vehicles and naval vessels to uniforms, badges and medals

120 million feet of cine film and over 6,500 hours of videotape

Over 6 million photographs, negatives and transparencies

Over 155,000 books

More than 32,000 hours of recordings of historical events and interviews with veterans and other participants in conflict since 1914

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