

The Home Front in Britain 1914-1918

An Archaeological Handbook

The Council for British Archaeology

When we think of archaeology in connection with the First World War our gaze turns automatically and understandably towards Northern France, Flanders and the Somme. Even though almost a century has passed since the end of that war and the battle-scarred landscape has returned to something like its former glory and agricultural richness, the earth still reveals from time to time the relics of battle. Farmers regularly plough up live shells, with sometimes tragic results, and the construction of new roads and high-speed railway lines will often reveal the remains of yet another soldier “missing in battle”, (there were over 100 000 of these lost souls.) Archaeological skills are then involved in an attempt to identify the dead soldier before he receives a dignified, if delayed, burial in one of the many military cemeteries which dot the landscape.

This CBA Handbook demonstrates that it is not necessary to cross the Channel to find evidence of the First World War. Although there was of course no trench warfare in the UK, the infrastructure of the country nevertheless underwent profound and widespread changes to accommodate and adapt to the requirements of this massive military challenge. Training areas were created where digging trenches and trench warfare was practiced; coastal defences were constructed; airfields were provided for the embryonic airforce; large country houses were converted into military hospitals; factories to make shells and other armaments were required, where generally most of the work was done by female labour, an astonishing social change which helped to further the cause of the suffragette movement; large camps for German prisoners of war sprang up; new railway lines were built as necessary to facilitate the movement of troops and arms, and so on.

All this activity has left traces in the environment. The book provides many examples with many illustrations, but the main purpose of the CBA is to encourage further archaeological research, either by the individual enthusiast or by archaeological groups, before what still remains disappears for ever. The emphasis is on local research by such groups and then the careful recording of what is found. A very valuable element of the book is the detailed information it provides on the many sources which now exist, thanks to the internet, to aid such historical and archaeological research.

A long list of experts has contributed to this book, including our own Cyril Pearce with a chapter on the extensive research he has carried out on what remains of the fate of the conscientious objectors. Even for the non-archaeologist it is an engrossing read with some fascinating illustrations. The book is available from Amazon, new at £12 with also used copies on offer more cheaply.