

Gaeilgeoirí of the Great War

Irish-Speaking Soldiers from East Belfast in WW1

With support from the National Lottery Heritage Fund, this project researched Irish speakers from inner-east Belfast who enlisted to fight in World War 1.

These soldiers were from the working-class communities that lived in and around Ballymacarrett and many of them worked in the local shipyards and factories. They included family groups, workmates and Catholic and Protestant neighbours.

Three years before the war, in the Census of 1911, all had said they were Irish speakers.



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About the Project

Our starting point for the project was the Census of 1911. We examined the data for east Belfast and identified males within the relevant age-range who had been returned as Irish speakers. Their names were then cross-referenced with the Great War Database of east Belfast soldiers, compiled by Jason Burke. Only those men who were living at their 1911 address at the time of enlistment and whose attestation papers are available could be identified with certainty. On this basis, we found 74 soldiers and their lives before, during and, in some cases, after the war were researched.

From the Census we knew a little about the soldiers and their families. We traced their military history through websites such as Forces War Records.org, Ancestry.com and sadly, in some cases, through the website of the War Graves Commission. The website www.greatwarbelfastclippings.com was also a very valuable resource for us.

Newspapers from the period provided additional information, while online searches of birth, marriage and death registrations and Belfast street directories helped us learn about the soldiers' lives after the war. We also made contact with local history, family history and heritage groups in east Belfast and with individual historians to further develop the work.

Belfast at the Outbreak of the War

By 1900, Belfast was a major industrial centre and much of that industry was located in the east of the city. The availability of work drew people from all over the country: in the 1911 Census, every county in Ireland was represented in east Belfast. This led to a wide range of cultural and religious diversity.

It also led to linguistic diversity. The Census of 1901 and 1911 recorded large numbers of Irish speakers, from all religious backgrounds, living in east Belfast. The large number of Irish speakers in part reflected the movement into the area from all parts of the country, but it also reflected the work of the Irish language revival movement, which attracted many prominent unionists. The first Belfast branch of Conradh na Gaeilge (the Gaelic League) was established in 1895 at a meeting on the Beersbridge Rd. Ultimately, there were five branches of the League in east Belfast and Irish classes were held locally.

An intriguing feature of the Census in Belfast is that responses to the question on language proficiency, and especially those from Protestant households, were frequently crossed out. Why this happened is unclear. It may have been a legitimate attempt by the enumerator to correct errors, but the frequency with which it occurred suggests it may have been for political reasons.

The Soldiers

The soldiers we identified all lived in inner east Belfast, in the area between the Holywood Arches and the Albert Bridge. Seventeen soldiers were married when they enlisted. The rest were young men, most of them still living with their parents and siblings. Some were underage when they joined up. At the time they enlisted many were working in the shipyards or ironworks, mostly as labourers. Others worked as firemen, printers, or in the building trades.

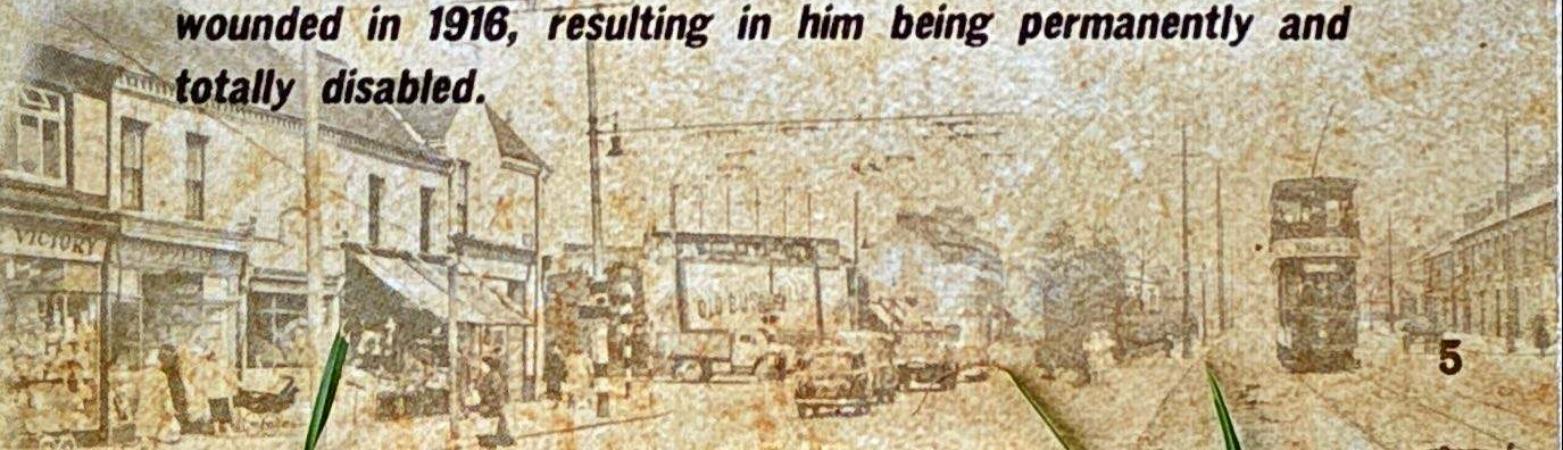
Almost 40 of the soldiers joined the regiments of the 36th Ulster Division: the Royal Irish Rifles, the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers and the Royal Irish Fusiliers. Most of these served with the Royal Irish Rifles, including at least 12 with the 8th Battalion, which had been formed in east Belfast in September 1914. The 36th Ulster Division fought in France and Flanders, including at the Somme. Some of the soldiers fought elsewhere and at least two were active in Gallipoli.

The soldiers included Catholics and Protestants and, given the small area they lived in, many were workmates and neighbours. Several family groups were also identified: mostly groups of brothers, but in one case a father and his two sons enlisted. Their experiences encapsulate the impact of the war on the young men of east Belfast and their families.



Brothers and Neighbours

- Three of our soldiers were neighbours on Tamar St and two of these had the same name. John Clarke was a married man employed in the ropeworks. He served with the 2nd Royal Irish Rifles. He lost an arm as a result of wounds, but survived the war. The second John Clarke lived across the road with his parents and worked as a shoemaker before the war. He served with the Royal Marine Light Infantry and he too survived. A few doors along, David Maxwell lived with his wife and young children. He served as a Lance Corporal with the 6th Royal Irish Rifles, but was killed in action in October 1916.
- Three soldiers also lived within doors of each other on Khartoum St. They included brothers Bernard and Joseph Hughes. Bernard served as a private with the Seaforth Highlanders. He survived the war but experienced hearing loss. His brother Gerald enlisted in November 1915 and was assigned to the Sherwood Foresters. He was discharged 5 days later, probably because he was underage. Their neighbour Joseph Kearney was not so fortunate. He enlisted in November 1915 when he was just 16 or 17 years old but gave his age as 19. He served with the Royal Irish Fusiliers and was dangerously wounded in 1916, resulting in him being permanently and totally disabled.



The Casualties

Eighteen of our soldiers died in the war, five of them at the Somme and most of the others elsewhere in France. For the most part, they were killed in action, but some died later of their wounds. Many of those who died were in their early twenties and some were killed in the early months of the war. Edward Arthur, a sixteen-year-old from Dunvegan St, enlisted underage in September 1914 and served for just 3 months before his death in France on 21st December 1914. William Wolfe Kennedy from Island St was killed in November 1914. He was twenty-five. In contrast, Patrick Joseph McGovern of Killowen St died of wounds received in battle in the closing months of the war, in August 1918. He was 22. The fallen soldiers were mostly very young and so they left behind parents and siblings. Just two were survived by their widows.

Twenty-three of the soldiers were wounded during the war, some of them on more than one occasion. A number of them were permanently disabled, having lost eyes or limbs. Several never worked again due to the severity of their injuries. They, like the mothers and widows of the fallen, were reliant on the pensions they were awarded. Jasper Pyne Gammon of Harper St served, as did his brother William. He was 40% disabled due to injuries received at the Somme and was awarded a pension of 16 shillings (80p). David Maxwell's widow received a pension of one pound, eight shillings and nine pence per week for herself and four young children.

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Coming Home

Fifty-six of our soldiers came back to east Belfast. Some returned to their previous homes and resumed their previous occupations. Nonetheless, their lives would never be the same again. The years after the war saw a new reality on the island of Ireland as partition and war changed the political landscape. The developments impacted on our soldiers. In 1921, Bernard Hughes of Khartoum St wrote to the war office seeking copies of his discharge papers as his had been destroyed in the sectarian riots that gripped Belfast the previous year. One year later, Hugh McGauran of the Short Strand, who had served during the war with the Royal Irish Rifles, had enlisted in the newly formed Irish Army.

The political developments also impacted on how participation in the war was understood. Ultimately, it came to be associated with unionism and celebration of its outcome became the preserve of unionists. The Irish language did not escape the upheaval. Whereas before the war it had been uncontentious, it now came to be seen as the preserve of nationalists. Participation in the war and ability in the language became markers of identity. Our soldiers, who fought together in the trenches and who were happy to call themselves Irish speakers, could not celebrate both.

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Seventy-four
Irish-speaking soldiers
from inner east Belfast
were identified by this project.
Eighteen of them are included on
this map.

