

Review of the WW1 Armistice Commemorations

“May I also thank you and your team (the Council) for an amazing tribute to our fallen during the Great War. It was an excellent demonstration of teamwork, planning and delivery of a very relevant and beautiful tribute.”

HM Coastguard (Orkney and Shetland).

Introduction

November 11, 2018 marked the centenary of the armistice that brought to an end the hostilities of the Great War. In Orkney, like numerous towns and cities across the UK the armistice was met with much fanfare whilst the full and true scale of devastation and lives lost began to sink in. A century on the armistice commemorations were another special moment for Orkney to reflect and remember those that lost their lives during the conflict. Several projects were planned to mark the occasion and to enable a wide a range of the community as possible to participate. The core of the activity was focussed on Remembrance Sunday itself.

The Great War: An Orkney Memorial Experience

The Kirkwall Townscape Heritage Initiative worked with the council’s Arts, Museums & Heritage service to commission a unique projection artwork for St Magnus Cathedral. The artwork was created by Glasgow based *Playdead*, a company specialising in motion graphics and animation. Following dialogue with local groups and schools *Playdead* developed a 22-minute film referencing significant events in Orkney’s First World War story and incorporated local archive imagery. The projection was presented on a loop each evening between the 1 – 11 November. It received wide acclaim from the public – this style of presentation was very assessable to a wide audience and highlighted once again the unique nature of the cathedral as a platform for public art, following the presentation of the Poppies in 2016. Attendance was very high, with over 50 people watching from the street at any given time during the evenings. A short of the film can be viewed at <https://vimeo.com/302843686>



Remembrance Sunday

Sunday 11 November included a full day of commemorations beginning at 6.00am with a Lone Piper playing Battle's O'er from the Kirk Green, part of the national tribute 'Battle's Over' co-ordinated by Bruno Peak.

The Remembrance Sunday parade and service was largely unchanged; however, several details were included in the events to highlight the significance of the centenary. White doves were released from the war memorial as a symbol of peace. As part of the Cathedral service, 3 young people read the names of those represented on the Kirkwall and St Ola war memorial. This poignant gesture was repeated at parish services across the county in an effort to ensure that the names of all those from Orkney were remembered during the day. Many also chose this opportunity to highlight particularly extraordinary and touching stories of men from their parish.

The Cathedral bells rang out at 12:00 noon in a series of bells crossing the world from New Zealand to America on the day.

Pages of the Sea



Orkney was one of a handful of places across Scotland to be selected to host Danny Boyle's armistice project *Pages of the Sea*. A 14-18 Now commission, produced in partnership with the National Theatre of Scotland and locally by the Council, the project saw large scale portraits of men and women lost during the war drawn onto local beaches across the UK. Through a series of public and school workshops in the lead up to the project participants were asked to reflect on local stories and to work with a specially commissioned poem by Carol Ann Duffy. During the afternoon of 11 November, a small group of volunteers and young people started work to produce a 30m portrait of Lieutenant Robert William Taylor M.C. at Scapa Beach. Alongside this, members of the public were invited to use stencils to create life size silhouettes on the sand, and later in the day to come together to read the poem.

The public reaction to the project and artwork was truly unprecedented. The concept of the artwork, combined with beautiful weather locally drew people to the beach in huge numbers. It is estimated that close to 2000 people gathered at Scapa to see the portrait and to pay their final respects as the darkness fell. When complete the portrait was surrounded by lanterns and the crowd gathered to hear a specially written tune played on guitar by Douglas Montgomery in memory of his grandfather.

There were numerous comments following the event which evidenced the powerful nature of the work and how much it meant to people locally. One of the common remarks was simply how much the community enjoyed being together on mass at this very important moment in time.

Armistice: Orkney Remembers

The other key event during the afternoon of 11 November was *Armistice: Orkney Remembers*, an arts event produced by members of the Orkney community. The

event was held at the Orkney Arts Theatre and included poetry, readings and musical contributions from Orkney Rocks as well as many young people and uniformed groups. The event was at full capacity and raised money for the charity Help for Heroes.

Remembrance Sunday conclusion

Remembrance Sunday concluded outside the Cathedral and on the Kirk Green. At 18:55 hrs The Last Post was played by a bugler, followed by a 'Cry for Peace' read by Christopher Gee. Council Convener Harvey Johnston lit a beacon on the green before the Cathedral bells were sounded for the last time that day. This sequence was also part of Bruno Peak's national tribute.

Once again, the public turnout was quite exceptional, with over 250 people gathered on Broad Street to pay their respects and see the Cathedral projection play for the last time. It was a fitting culmination to a day that will be long remembered here in Orkney.

Summary of the Commemorative Period

What went well

- The armistice commemorations were developed and planned through a continuation of the WW1 Member Officer Working Group that has operated throughout the commemorative period. The group includes key stakeholders and functioned well to produce the events. Working relationships between all organisations, both external to the council and within the council continue to be enhanced by the process.
- The attendance figures at all events across the armistice period and on Remembrance Sunday greatly surpassed what had been anticipated.
- Orkney continues to develop and present events of national and international repute and in a way that engages meaningfully with the community and visitors.
- Throughout these events the Council, due to the efforts of its staff, is considered to be a project partner who has the knowledge and skills to develop work of the highest quality with the minimum of fuss. 14-18 NOW, The National Theatre of Scotland and Playdead, all companies of international standing have commented that the council is effective, easy and enjoyable to work with.
- Orkney has, once again, been broadcast on the national stage, with events and projects reaching far and wide through the media. The long-term impact of this cannot be guaranteed, although it would be expected to have a significant positive effect.
- The talent of local people continues to be celebrated and widely recognised through the events.
- The council's communications team are a vital part of the project team and did a fantastic job of supporting the distribution of information quickly and effectively. Project partners greatly value their support and they ensure events are promoted and covered by the media locally and further afield.
- The armistice was captured beautifully in a special supplement published by The Orcadian the following week – 12 pages provide a wonderful overview of commemorative events across the county.

- The numbers of people volunteering to help at the various events and the participation of the wider community was brilliant once again. All events took countless hours of time and energy for people to organise and run and in this a lot of people gained new knowledge and skills. As with previous events, the WW1 Commemorations could not have happened without the band of volunteers who gave up their time to help.

Lessons Learnt

- The capacity of staff to deliver such events, often on top of their core roles and responsibilities remains a challenge, however the willingness to get the job done and the close working relationships internally and with stakeholders ensures high quality delivery.
- Working with partners external to Orkney brings with it complexities of its own. This was particularly true of the Pages of the Sea project which we were asked to produce at very short notice and with minimal support. Communications between several project partners was tricky at times but broadly speaking the event was delivered successfully. A hot debrief was undertaken to evaluate the details of this event and there are some useful lessons to learn in relation to traffic and people management, however the huge public response was totally beyond what had been anticipated and a more realistic lead in time would have normally enabled more robust planning to take place.
- It was commented on publicly that a road closure could have been put in place for the event at the Cathedral on the Sunday evening so that traffic did not interfere. This was considered beforehand and deemed unnecessary by the project team due to the short duration - less than 10 minutes - and the possible attendance. However, each event will continue to be evaluated on a case by case basis and this feedback will be taken into account in the planning of future events.

Planned future commemorations

2019

Planning is underway to mark the centenary of the scuttling of the German Fleet in Scapa Flow on the 21 June 1919.