

Salvaging and restoring a piece of history

When a fire rips through a museum with devastating results, precious artefacts with unique stories potentially lost, how can you salvage and restore what is left behind?

Restoring the Surrey Infantry Museum collection following the Clandon Park fire

The stories that museums tell are narrated by artefacts collected from that period. Those artefacts are cared for so future generations can enjoy and learn from them. When a fire rips through a museum with devastating results, those unique stories can be lost.

Surrey Infantry Museum, which was based at 18th century Clandon Park for over 30 years, suffered such an incident. With our help and restoration experts Farcroft, we responded to save the collection from being lost forever.



Images left to right: the medal display wall before the fire. Top right: fire damaged metal cabinet containing medals. Bottom right: damaged medal.



Devastation

On 29 April 2015, fire engulfed Clandon Park destroying the Grade I listed stately home. The Surrey Infantry Museum, situated in its basement that houses artefacts and archives from the Queen's Royal Surrey Regiment, was also destroyed, and the 85 firefighters tackling the blaze gave evacuation orders at 7.30pm as it was too dangerous to continue.

Among the museum's collections, was approximately 2,300 pre-1936 medals presented on an impressive display wall, in cabinets with Perspex tops, and in a multi draw metal cabinet.

Stephen Johnson, manager of the museum says the medals not only act as 'milestones' in military history but as personal testimonies to the men and women who served during two world wars and countless other engagements. All of the medals have been donated rather than purchased, mostly by the recipients themselves or their relatives who invariably feel it is appropriate for the medals to return to the 'regimental family'. In turn the museum tries to maintain this covenant by placing the medals on public display and, where possible, telling the stories of the men to whom they were awarded."



Firefighters stand next to metal drawers consumed by fire which had contained historic medals

The medal collection includes an unusual group of medals which reveal a little of the adventurous life of Major Frederick George Jackson of The East Surrey Regiment. Two medals are unique and were awarded before he had even joined the Army. Major Jackson died in 1938 and has since been memorialised in St Paul's Cathedral.

The collection also contained four replica Victoria Cross (VC) medals, the highest award for gallantry. One of these was awarded to WWI serviceman Arthur Fleming-Sandes in November, 1915 for most conspicuous bravery. Under bombing and heavy machine-fire, and surrounded by exhausted men, he picked up some of the bombs, stood on the parapet in full view, and threw them at the enemy. His gallantry revived and rallied the men and saved the situation.

A third of the medal collection and all the medal ribbons, plus other irreplaceable artefacts such as the football famously kicked across No Man's Land at the Battle of the Somme, were lost in the fire.

And a large number from the wall and around the museum were badly damaged including Major Jackson's and Fleming-Sandes' VC's.

Restoration

The salvage operation took two years, after which the gargantuan task to identify and sort the artefacts ensued. Farcrofts, restoration specialists, were appointed by us to lead the restoration.

Ashley Clarke, Director, Farcroft says the trustees set to work building an inventory of the medals that had been recovered from the debris. "All pre-1936 medals have a surname on the rim and we were able to clean up most to make them identifiable. The trustees have detailed written records of the medals as well as a phenomenal knowledge of stories about the soldiers they were awarded to. This was invaluable as we arranged the medals into sets and decided which were viable to restore."



Left to right: A fire-damaged medal and the same cleaned and restored. Arthur Fleming-Sandes' VC before damage which is currently undergoing repair.

Around 1400 medals that remained in the debris have since been painstakingly recovered and carefully processed to minimise the risk of contamination. Many were covered in aluminium, which had melted onto them during the fire so they had to be 'freed', before identification.

Paul Humphris, Claims Specialist Consultant at Ecclesiastical says that his first site visit and initial inspection showed what appeared to be very little left of the museum. The team sifted through, they found gems that had survived.

"The fact that some of the medals survived is remarkable, considering the extent of the destruction and the ferocity of the fire," he says. "Dust and soot had got into every nook and cranny, and the glass in the cabinet had melted onto the surface of the medals. Those medals that were on the walls, or in individual display cabinets with Perspex tops were completely devastated and beyond restoration. In addition, the ground floor had huge amounts of asbestos and lead oxide contamination from the collapsing floors above."

As a result, the recovery team had to wear full protection suits specially made for the task and had to have regular blood tests to ensure they were not being exposed to harmful contaminants.

"A great sadness of course is that the ribbons that go with the medals were all lost. These had to be painstakingly researched and reproduced to go with each individual medal that could be saved."

Outcome

Over three years since the fire, the restoration project continues. Over two thirds of the medal collection have now been accounted for but a significant number remain missing. "It is also important to remember that the fire is now part of the museum's history," says Humphris. "So not all medals will be restored and some may be redisplayed with their fire damage to preserve this piece of their history."

Stephen Johnson, Manager at the museum, says The Surrey Infantry Museum can once again be proud to be the custodian of a medal collection of national importance. "We look forward to returning them to public display, initially in our current temporary location at the Surrey History Centre in Woking and, after completion of its refurbishment and expansion project, at Guildford Museum which will become Surrey Infantry Museum's permanent home."

As for Major Jackson's medals and Fleming-Sandes' VC, they have been recovered and are currently undergoing restoration and the museum is looking forward to returning them to public display.

For further information visit
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