The Museum’s work in the First World War

By Daisy Cunynghame

Much is known about the Museum’s work and contribution to the efforts of the Second World War. One of the Special Operations Executive (SOE) workshops was even housed in the Museum, where new weapons, explosives and sabotage techniques were invented and developed by the British war organisation. But less is known about the contributions made in the First World War – both by individuals and as a Museum collective.

The Museum made important contributions to the war effort in a wide range of areas – supplying departmental expertise, furthering public education, providing public services and, of course, undertaking military service. The work helped solve many practical day-to-day problems, as well as developing innovations that aided in military strategy. Often the solutions found or attempted were ingenious and imaginative.

A number of Museum workers volunteered for military service, although casualties were inevitable and 13 were killed. Supplying men for the British Expeditionary Force was obviously one important facet of the Museum’s role in the war, but there were many others. Some people translated German reports and correspondence. A number of scientists used their contacts on the continent to distribute propaganda, including The Manifesto of the Intellectuals and Gee! I Wish I Were a Man. The Museum also provided British prisoners of war with scientific publications for a little light reading.

There were several war-related projects and exhibitions at the Museum for soldiers and the general public. A war farm was built at the eastern end of the grounds, which was tended by wounded soldiers as well as staff. The Museum was kept open to the public throughout the war, to provide an escape for convalescing soldiers and to educate the public on important matters related to the war effort. Special exhibitions included managing wartime allotments, dealing with infestations of various bugs, and how to prevent the killing of carrier pigeons by differentiation from the feral type.

The Entomology Department’s part in the war effort was very important, having direct effects on the health of soldiers, food supplies and military operations. Work was done to find solutions to tick- and mite-related damage – on humans, army horses and food supplies. Additionally, important research was undertaken on how to protect the envelopes of air ships from attacks by insects, how to minimise the impact of mosquitoes and scabies on soldiers in the trenches and mites attacking food stores, and how to protect telephone and telegraph cables in the tropics.

Our armies in Egypt sent many enquiries to the Zoology Department, most of them relating to flat-worms, snails and the like, from a perspective of disease, food supply, water supply and commerce. Zoology contributed important work in other areas as well, including the use of crustaceans to determine the age of wrecks when examining sunken submarines, and an ambitious study on the use of gulls to locate enemy submarines. Gulls were successfully trained to identify submerged submarines by circling above them – although teaching them to distinguish between a Fritz and a Tommy sub proved less successful. While this particular study did not produce the desired result, it is a great example of just how creative Museum scientists were during the war.

The Botany Department gave advice to the military on topics such as the use of moss for surgical dressings, suitable food for humans and horses in foreign climes, and seaweeds and fungi safe for human consumption. Other areas of guidance included camouflaging weapons, the right timber to use for airplanes and air ships to avoid issues with insects and fungi, and how to prevent tents from being destroyed by fungus.

The Geology Department provided advice on where to drill for water and mine, based on fossil specimens. But perhaps their most important work was in relation to the battlefields themselves, where they gave information and guidance on the geology of the Italian and Belgian fronts. In addition, the department played a key role in finding a way to build and maintain cement platforms in salt water for the docking of naval vessels.

The staff in the Museum played an important role in the war effort, but the specimens themselves also proved invaluable. External visitors used the collections for a variety of ends. Mineralogy specimens were used to study the make-up of German trench cement and Austrian steel components, while overseas governments examined entomological collections to identify pests and insects of potential economic significance.

This, of course, is just a small sample of the extensive impact of the Museum’s staff and collections on the war effort. Owing to the ingenuity and dedication of individuals, as well as the value of the collections for a myriad of purposes, the Natural History Museum can rightly claim to have been an integral part of the First World War.