

# Planning for 2014

## Resourcing children's learning about the first world war

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In 2014 the start of the First World War, one hundred years before, will be remembered. This article suggests how teachers of under 11s can track down some of the best information texts, stories and websites to inform and encourage children's creative response.

### Introduction

How do you approach such a troubling and complex subject as war with children in the primary years? Conflict is a tragic everyday reality for many children across the world and young readers need to be helped to understand and to reflect on sad and dismaying happenings. Teachers may wish to read the detailed discussion of these issues in *War* by Carol Fox and Peter Hunt (2004). Here I concentrate on some of the books and materials on the First World War which inform and inspire a creative response. In the past books and comics about conflict for a boy readership tended, like the Biggles stories – the first of which is set in the First World War, to stress the actual fighting. Books for girls concentrated on 'fortitude, adventure and gentleness' (Watson 2001, p. 737). More recent books have been aimed at both girls and boys and are often about how people experience the effects of war. What is it like to lose a loved one or to find your house has been destroyed? Like other wars, the First World War had a huge impact on the lives of the whole nation.

I have organised my recommended resources round a clutch of key themes that are associated with the First World War. These are: life at the front and at home, trench warfare, the Christmas truce and poppies and remembrance.

But first I turn, briefly, to causes of the war and the sequence of events:

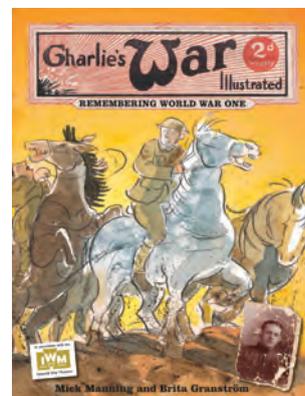
in a nutshell, an Archduke was killed in Sarajevo giving the German Emperor, William III (Kaiser Bill), an excuse to start a war. There is a dramatic account of the assassination, perfect for reading aloud to the class, in the first chapter of *The First World War* by Conrad Mason (2010). Teachers and children would also find this book, which tells the story of the war simply and effectively, helps with the creation of a timeline. It is worth mentioning that while including copious, pertinent and interesting illustrations, this book is also written so that children moving to chapter books experience extended blocks of writing to promote their reading development and stamina. The 'war in brief' part of

the BBC's schools website – key words 'worldwarone' – also helps build a picture of a complicated sequence of events.

### Life at the front and at home

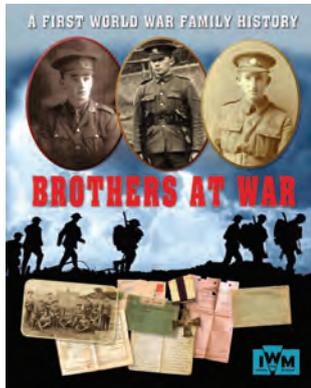
There are, of course, many traditional children's information books about the topic and they tend to cover the same ground. Brocklehurst and Brook's *The Usborne Introduction to the First World War* (2007) is comprehensive and well organised with helpful internet 'quicklinks' to extend research and understanding. But teachers often find it best to start with a story – one that fascinates and helps the children connect with the lives of people who lived through the conflict. 'Information stories', based on real people and real events, use autobiographical writing as a device. *Charlie's War Illustrated* by Mick Manning and Brita Granström (2013) tells one man's story in his own words as remembered by his grandson, one of the authors:

'In 1914, war broke out. It was Fred who spotted the poster first! Lord Kitchener seemed to be pointing right at us!.... we all wanted to be like the red-coated war heroes from *Boy's Own Paper*'.



Another involving book, concentrating mainly on soldiers' experience in the trenches, is *Brothers At War* by Sarah Ridley (2012). Four brothers join the army and we hear of their lives as soldiers at the front. Young readers accompany Eliza,

one of Arthur Baker's great grandchildren, as she uncovers letters and diaries a hundred years later. But we also hear about the brothers' country childhood and life at boarding school where Arthur recovered from a life threatening bout of typhoid fever. This reinforces the understanding that soldiers are people with experiences apart from fighting in a war. This author, with the help of Eliza, manages to make social history personal.



Another way into the topic is to see events and privations through the viewpoint of a child. Based on a true story about a young boy from Durham *One Boy's War* by Huggins-Cooper and Benfold Haywood (2010) draws attention to the many who enlisted when under the minimum required age. The misplaced excitement as well as feelings of foreboding come across clearly. As well as showing the realities of life at the front, this book also uses detailed illustrations to show the clothes and artefacts of the times and give insight into what life was like at home.

Marcia Williams' book *Archie's War* (2007) also takes us into the world of a young boy living through the war years. She remarked in an author interview that WW1 seems to have 'smashed into people's lives without warning, devastating every bit of normality'. Yes, indeed, war affects the lives of ordinary people. When she took on the task of writing for children about this period she asked herself how she could 'explain this to a generation so far removed from that type of horror in a way that was honest, but not melodramatic or overly horrific'. The answer came with the device of Archie (Williams & Mallett 2013):

*'If I work from the perspective of a young boy who had lived through this experience, it will be easier to give the facts honestly, yet not neglect the emotions that these facts might have created. As a writer, I believe that I have to respect suffering and only write what might bring a greater compassion and understanding.'*

The power of the visual image when selecting books is something to keep in mind. *The 1910s Scrapbook* (Opie 2009) is a good source of pictures about life at home and at the front and a good starting point for reflection and discussion. What do you think of the Horrible Histories series? Deary and Brown's *The Frightful First World War* (2007) has the usual cartoons and visual jokes even on the dark aspects of the war. It has to be admitted that many children love this approach and perhaps humour helps people cope with the horrific happenings. In most primary school

projects, on any topic, there seems to be an image that is memorable and talked about by children long after the work has ended. The iconic image may be something they have seen in a book, on a website or at the Imperial War Museum perhaps. I find Manning and Granström's picture of the English soldiers meeting the column of German prisoners along a French country lane returns to me. The young British soldiers realise that the prisoners are not monsters but young men not unlike themselves, caught up in the same awful war. The cartoon pictures in *Archie's War* give a tremendous sense of an ordinary family's everyday life – what they ate, how they relaxed. Very telling is the picture of Archie's mother returning to the family after an explosion at the munitions factory where she worked.

The books discussed here have huge potential for encouraging children's imaginative response:

- talk, of course, about topics like women's work for the war effort, the food families ate and the fear of the telegraph boy's arrival with a telegram bringing dreadful news
- improvised drama about scenes from family life
- readings from books about personal experiences for another class or an assembly
- art work: pictures of contemporary artefacts; cartoons of family life; pictures of contemporary recruitment posters
- writing might include a class scrapbook about the war; an illustrated diary page of a soldier's life at the front; a day in the life of a child in the war years – hobbies, food etc.
- a class display of writing, art work and artefacts
- an 'Archie's box'. Marcia Williams takes a box of items a child might have used during the war as a talking point in her workshops on the First World War. Facsimile artefacts are available from the Imperial War Museum, but children could make or draw magazines, children's wooden toys and so on.

### Trench war

*'Another problem for the lads was "trench foot"; days in wet boots and socks made their feet go rotten' (Manning and Granström 2013, p. 14).*

Trenches – those deep, defensive hiding places dug along the front line, marking out the forward position of the opposing armies with no man's land between - are icons of the First World War. They became ever more elaborate as the war dragged on. In their book *Charlie's War Illustrated* Manning and Granström show what it would have been like to live and work in a trench for long periods. Their diagrams of a trench could inspire children's own sketches. Other creative responses might be short dramatic improvisations of trench life - meals and games, rats and lice and so on, and illustrated diaries and cartoons.

### Christmas truce

It lasted only a single day, but the Christmas truce is one of the more hopeful events in a grim war. It is worth talking about with children because it shows that soldiers on both sides were just ordinary people with all the hopes,

anxieties and feelings that life brings. On Christmas day 1914 soldiers on some parts of the Western Front came out of their trenches into no man's land between the battle lines. They exchanged small gifts and some played football. Information books on the First World War almost always describe it, see for example Brocklehurst and Brook's *The Usborne Introduction to The First World War* (2007). But many teachers of the under 11s read out loud the powerful and moving account in Michael Foreman's picture book *War Game* (2006), either for its own sake or as a starting point for children's research about and response to the war. Another absorbing story about the event, one with a modern twist, is Michael Morpurgo's *The Best Christmas Present in the World* (2004). Children will enjoy talking about both the issues these books raise, for example the situation of very young men risking their lives in a war few of them really understood, and how the authors and illustrators of the books make these issues real and affecting. As we see in the classroom vignette shown in the box below, writing can also be encouraged.

A Year 5 class were captivated by the story and illustrations in Michael Foreman's picture book, *War Game* (2006), about an extraordinary event during the early part of the war: the Christmas truce. Their comments and questions led to enthusiastic research. One outcome was the children's writing and illustrating of *A guide to staying alive in the trenches*. 'This was filled with the evidence of their researches and did include some very funny and pertinent aspects' (Tracy Parvin).

What is interesting here is that the teacher, Tracy Parvin, had not intended the sharing of the book to be the start of lessons on the First World War. In this case it was offered as an enjoyable listening experience. The teacher had not expected the children would respond as passionately as they did. This fine picture book could be an exciting, planned starting point for a series of lessons or unit on the war. But this classroom vignette is also strong support for making time in the curriculum to follow up unexpected enthusiasm.

### Poppies and war memorials

'Researching the lives of the soldiers made them real people and not just names on a memorial'  
Bethan, Year 5 ([www.learnaboutwarmemorials.org](http://www.learnaboutwarmemorials.org)).

The poppy is a symbol of war and battlefields, and also of remembrance and hope. These two aspects are brought together beautifully in John McCrae's poem *In Flanders Fields*. The images of poppies blooming and birds flying have enormous appeal for younger children. There is an animated presentation of the poem on the BBC's schools world war one website. And part of the same poem is shown in speech bubbles on page 31 of *Charlie's War Illustrated* (Manning & Granström 2013). The poppy is very evident in the decoration of the many war memorials which were built throughout the country recording the names of

those who had died in the war (Ridley 2012, p. 28 & 29). The War Memorial Trust reminds the young that they are the future custodians of the war memorials. Visit the website for both information for teachers and suggestions for children's activities. Ideas include research into names on war memorials – perhaps in the local area – and for making their own designs and paintings. I was impressed with the lesson plans offered here – not least because they are adaptable: teachers' and children's own ideas for activities and research can be incorporated. Each child's personal response is encouraged. Above all the materials and information help answer the question 'What is remembrance?'

### Annotated list of children's books, websites and museums mentioned

Children around the same age have different degrees of reading stamina but it is hoped the rough age suggestions will be helpful.

#### BBC Website [www.bbc.co.uk/schools/worldwarone](http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/worldwarone).

This site is for secondary aged children but teachers of younger children would find the 'War in Brief' helpful. There is a moving animated presentation of John McCrae's poem *In Flanders Fields*.

#### Brocklehurst, R. (editor) & Brook, H. (2007) *The Usborne Introduction to the First World War*. Usborne. ISBN 9780746076552. 9+

Written in association with the Imperial War Museum, this richly illustrated book is divided into short chapters covering the main events on the front line and topics like 'A Christmas Truce', 'On the Home Front' and 'Remembrance'. The Usborne quicklink gives further information: [www.usborne-quicklinks.com](http://www.usborne-quicklinks.com), keywords - History of Britain - then click on First World War.

#### Deary, T. (2007, illus. Martin Brown) *The Frightful First World War (Horrible Histories)*. Scholastic. ISBN 9781407103020. 9+

Like the other books in the series this one is accessible and tells how a conflict expected to last a few months dragged on for four years. So many people suffered terribly and some might feel the approach here is too light hearted, but others feel the jokes and cartoons offer light relief from a dark subject.

#### Foreman, M. (2006) *War Game: Village Green to No-man's-land*. Pavilion. ISBN 9781843650898. 7+

The author's four brothers enlist and become part of an iconic event: a Christmas truce during which they play football with their German foes. Atmospheric water colours and good storytelling give this book huge appeal for the under 11s.

#### Huggins-Cooper, L. & Benfold Haywood, I. (2010) *One Boy's War*. Frances Lincoln Children's Books. ISBN 9781847801265. 8+

A young boy living in Durham tells his story about joining up to fight in the First World War after seeing the flyers in the recruiting station – 'It's like they're calling me'. The illustrations tell young readers much about the clothes people wore and their life style at this time. The excitement

about the war felt by many young boys is highlighted - they did not know how terrible and long lasting it would be.

**Imperial War Museums [www.iwm.org.uk](http://www.iwm.org.uk).**

This website gives information about the galleries, resources and workshops at this family of five museums, concentrating on the period from WW1 to the present day. The London branch has been closed for major construction work and reopens partially in July 2013, and fully in July 2014 with brand new WW1 galleries. These new galleries will offer stories by people experiencing the war in different ways and suggest new ways of looking at this momentous time. The First World War Centenary Partnership has been set up as one of the centenary initiatives; this is a network of over 500 local, regional, national and international cultural and educational organisations.

**Manning, M. & Granström, B. (2013) *Charlie's War Illustrated - Remembering World War One*. Franklin Watts. ISBN 9781445110332. 8+**

This large format information picture book explores important aspects of WW1 by telling the stories of Mick Manning's grandfather and great uncles who served as soldiers. A format resembling that of a contemporary magazine allows the authors to show aspects of the patriotism and propaganda that accompany war. Each double spread is superbly designed with pictures, maps and diagrams.

**Mason, C. (2010) *The First World War (Usborne Young Reading series 3)*. Usborne Publishing Ltd. ISBN 9781409508106. 9+**

Comment and analysis is built into this narrative which is made interesting by including what people said about the conflict and the terrible suffering, and by carefully chosen annotated illustrations. Some over 9s would manage the story on their own. Particular chapters could be read aloud to the class or group to enrich a lesson.

**Morpurgo, M. (2006) *War Horse*. Egmont Books. ISBN 9781405226660. 9+**

Can animals be brave? They can certainly suffer. This book shows us the dark side of war through the experiences of a young horse. Joey was a farm horse requisitioned by the army to serve on the western front. Michael Morpurgo shows us the connection there can be between a human and animal. The play based on it, first performed at The National Theatre, was recommended for age 12 and over, as was the film, but children younger than this often appreciate reading the book. There is also an audio CD, an abridged version read by Dan Stevens (2010 Harper Collins. ISBN 9780007357444).

**Morpurgo, M. (2004, illus. Michael Foreman) *The Best Christmas Present in the World*. Egmont Books. ISBN 9781405215183. 8+**

Young readers are drawn into the realities of trench life through the device of a letter, found in an old desk, recording the experiences of one young soldier.

**Opie, R. (2009) *The 1910s Scrapbook: The Decade of the Great War*. Pi Global Publishing Limited. ISBN 9780954795474. 8+**

'This is a phenomenal source of visual information, which helped contextualise the era.' This is Tracy Parvin's assessment of the value of this book to her Year 5 class who were researching the First World War.

**Ridley, S. (2012) *Brothers at War - A First World War Family History*. Franklin Watts. ISBN 9781445108704. 9+**

Eleven year old Eliza and her mother (the author of the book) find out about the First World War by looking into the lives of family members who lived through it. These family members include Eliza's great great grandfather Arthur and his brothers. How do they find information about how their forbears experienced the war? They examine letters - many from the front line - and a prisoner of war's diary.

**War Memorials Trust**

This was set up for the protection and conservation of war memorials in the UK. Their new website provides resources and ideas for activities for the primary school age group: [www.learnaboutwarmemorials.org](http://www.learnaboutwarmemorials.org).

**Williams, M. (2007) *Archie's War: My scrapbook of World War 1, 1914-1918*. Walker Books. ISBN 978406304275. 8+**

The story of a young boy's war years is told through comic strip, letters and annotated drawings. Young readers get a sense of what life was like for an ordinary family at this time. Nothing cosy about this - Archie and Granny do not always see eye to eye! The author takes 'Archie's box' with interesting contemporary magazines and memorabilia on school visits to inspire young writers and artists.

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