

The Great War's hidden stories reveal heroism and tragedy in equal measure

JOHNSON, Esther <<http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8884-4192>>

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The Great War's hidden stories reveal heroism and tragedy in equal measure

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The Blyth Spartans team of 1917, including Bella Reay (front row, centre) who scored a hat-trick in the Munitionettes Cup. Yvonne Crawford, Author provided

Author



Esther Johnson

Professor of Film and Media Arts, Principal Lecturer in Film and Media Production, Sheffield Hallam University

World War I is still seared into the national consciousness thanks largely to Remembrance Sunday. Most people, even those who might not consider themselves to be students of history, will know the general themes of that conflict: the devastating loss of life, the gruelling trench warfare and new jobs for women. But during my film research for *Asunder*, I found stories that had been hidden from view.

My film highlights nine real-life accounts based in Sunderland and the north-east, a vulnerable area during World War I due to its shipyards and munitions factories. These extraordinary tales, found during research in more than 20 local and national archives, include accounts of the immense changes for women and the challenges of working women's suffrage activism.

In contrast, there are also tales of conscientious objecting, pacifism, and what it was like on the first day of the Battle of the Somme.

The goal scorer

On Christmas Day 1917 the citizens of Blyth in Northumberland turned out in large numbers to see Blyth Spartans play their Munitionette Cup rivals Gosforth Aviation, in aid of the Duke of Wellington Social Club's Parcel Fund. The final score was a 6-0 win for Spartans, including a hat trick from a 17-year-old Bella Reay.

Reay, the daughter of a coal miner, was a munitions worker in the South docks of Blyth. She took any opportunity to kick a football around on the nearby sands during factory work breaks and would go on to become a top footballer, scoring 133 goals as centre forward in a single season. During World War I, thousands of women munition workers played football, but Blyth Spartans Ladies' FC were exceptional.





Blyth Spartans leading goal scorer Bella Raey. Yvonne Crawford, Author provided

The Spartans were unbeatable (from 33 games in one season, they won 29, and drew four), winning the Munitionettes' Cup Final on May 18 1918 at Middlesborough's Ayresome Park in front of a crowd of 22,000. In a time of austerity and fear, Reay and her team not only kept the crowds in good spirits but also raised over £2,000 for the local community.

Women's football during the war was both competitive and highly skilled. But as the war came to an end and munitions factories closed, teams crumpled and disbanded. A few women continued to play until 1921 when the FA banned women's football on their grounds - a ban not lifted until the 1970s.

Reay married and became Mrs Henstock, having two daughters. She worked for years in the shipyards at Blyth. After retirement she was enticed back to play a few matches to help raise funds, playing for Cowpen, Cambois, and a team known simply as Blyth. She could still score goals, scoring all four in Cowpen's 4-0 win between Cowpen and Bebside.

I spoke to Yvonne Crawford, Reay's granddaughter, who told me how ladies football was used as a way to raise funds for the soldiers wounded in the war and how Reay took to it. She said:

She loved her football, she loved it. Everybody wanted her, because she was such a good goal scorer. She played for the Munitionette's, she played for Blyth Spartan's, she played for Northumberland, she played for England. She used to say to me, 'I was good, but mind I knew I was'.

Shot by firing squad

Not all the stories I found were so uplifting. Robert Hope, was a 19-year-old soldier and former shipyard caulker in Deptford, Sunderland. Hope enlisted under the pseudonym of Private James Hepple, and on initial training in Ireland, he met and married a 15-year-old Derry girl called Rosina McGilloway.

Once posted to the 1st Battalion in Gallipoli, the couple never saw one another again. Robert had been shot at, shelled and gassed in some of the bloodiest battles of World War I. After fighting in the

Somme, Robert went absent without leave for 11 weeks. On being captured, he was charged with desertion and, after a hearing that lasted just ten minutes, he was killed by firing squad on the July 5 1917, one of 306 soldiers shot at dawn during the conflict.

One of the most heartening aspects of the film's research was tracking down and meeting living relatives of the people that feature in *Asunder*. I contacted Bernard Hope, second cousin to Robert, who said:

I was never told about Robert when I was growing up ... he was written out of our family history.





Private J Hepple's grave at Ferme-Olivier Cemetery, near Ypres, 5 July 2017. Esther Johnson, Author provided (No reuse)

I also met Geoff Simmons, the great-nephew of Captain Alan Lendrum, the soldier charged with shooting Robert. He recounted how his great-uncle was court-martialled in July 1917 for refusing to take charge of the execution because he knew Robert personally. He was subsequently demoted from captain to lieutenant but, in view of his continued bravery in the field, this was overturned.

Robert's young wife married again and had ten children – none of who were told about Robert. Some family members in Derry were led to believe that he had run off with another woman, such was the shame and scandal attached to what happened to him. But Rosina still thought enough of him to pay for an inscription on his grave.

This was a unique period in history and it contains some truly amazing characters, all of who deserve to be remembered for their own part in the story.

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