The British Civil Wars of the mid-17th Century are often overlooked in history classrooms and television channels, yet they represent one of the most traumatic periods in the history of Britain, killing proportionally far more British than the World Wars of the 20th Century. In an effort to communicate the human cost of the Civil Wars, Dr Andrew Hopper and history PhD students Stewart Beale and Hannah Worthen write about their recent exhibition ‘Battle-Scarred’, which displays medical instruments and aspects of 17th Century welfare systems.

The British Civil Wars (1638–1652) are considered by many historians to be the most unsettling experience undergone by the British and Irish peoples. Homes were destroyed, property stolen, and women forced to watch as their sons and husbands marched off to war with no guarantee of return. These bloody conflicts marked a change from previous wars as Parliament's concern for the 'commonweal' led to centralised care for the welfare of sick and injured soldiers who had 'suffered in the State's service'. These innovative measures were immensely significant as, for some, they led to improved medical treatment, permanent military hospitals, and a national pension scheme. For the very first time, Parliament publicly assumed responsibility for such matters, signifying an acceptance of the State's duty of care to its servicemen and their families.

Exploring these themes, an exhibition, titled 'Battle-Scarred', has been curated by our team from Leicester's Centre for English Local History led by Dr Andrew Hopper and Visiting Fellow, and Dr Eric Gruber von Arni, at the National Civil War Centre at Newark Museum. It showcases the human aspects of the Civil Wars, reminding us that real people suffered, and that successive governments had to pick up the pieces of shattered livelihoods across the country.

The civilian cost

It has been estimated that between 180,000 and 190,000 people, including civilians, died from combat and war-related diseases in England and Wales alone between 1642 and 1651, equating to a population loss of about 3% – though the loss in Scotland and Ireland was certainly higher. To put these losses into context, the First World War is generally regarded as the conflict which resulted in the greatest loss of British lives, and the Second World War as the one that had the greatest impact on the civilian population. Yet if the above estimate is even approximately correct, then a far larger percentage of the British Isles' population died as a direct result of the Civil Wars than in the World Wars. The impact of the World Wars was immense, and has continued to resonate through British and Irish society right to the present day. How much greater must the impact of the Civil Wars have been upon the far smaller seventeenth-century populations? Some of those who had suffered were still petitioning for relief forty years later. There are indications that thousands of veterans and civilians were afflicted with mental health problems as a result of the conflict. The impact of this is all too easy to imagine when we consider how British society was traumatised by the psychological legacy of the World Wars.

Women in the Civil Wars

Not many people today are aware of this, but many women played an active role in the Civil Wars, defending their homes against opposing forces, digging trenches to defend their towns, or else serving as nurses, spies and couriers. Research into the experiences of women whose husbands did not return, reveals harrowing stories of grief and hardship inflicted by the war. Few of these petitions for relief were written by widows themselves, since many were illiterate. Instead, they were often written for them by clergymen, scribes, schoolmasters and members of the parish elite. However, since petitioners had to appear before magistrates in person to corroborate the details of their petitions, the personal stories within them certainly contain more than an element of truth.

These petitions offer the closest access to the voices of plebeian widows during the mid-seventeenth century. By analysing the language and rhetoric utilised by petitioners, we are better able to assess not only female experiences of war, but also the ways in which women fashioned themselves to appear deserving of relief. This method constitutes what some might call 'history from below', in which those who occupied the lower rungs of society form the subject of research. This is not to suggest that noble women did not find themselves widowed, since men from all levels of society – both rich and poor alike – served and died in the wars.

Lessons for today

Several thousand petitions survive across England and Wales written on behalf of maimed soldiers detailing how they had survived their injuries but now needed financial support owing to their incapacitation from work. These petitions provide a powerful reminder that the consequences and human costs of war do not end with treaties and peace settlements, but linger on for generations. They also tell us much about how the common people remembered the wars, and articulated their losses and sufferings in the subsequent decades.

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The exhibition highlights the human costs of the catastrophe of Civil War

An interactive experience

If you get the chance, the exhibition includes numerous interactive displays and opportunities to provide feedback, so pay it a visit sometime in the next year. You can remove a musket ball from a model arm, wear a plague doctor’s mask, and practice skills in amputating a soldier’s leg! The exhibition includes some stellar items on loan from the Fairfax family, such as the wheelchair that the creator of the New Model Army, Sir Thomas Fairfax used, riddled with his old war wounds, in later life. There are even his boots and cavalry gauntlet, along with a present given him by his deputy, Oliver Cromwell – a water bottle made from the hide of Cromwell’s dead horse, and a case which displays civil-war surgical equipment alongside a modern day military kit (demonstrating that, in fact, not that much has changed!).

Within the exhibition there is an interactive display which asks ‘What should take responsibility for the welfare and maintenance of wounded armed service personnel and their dependents?’. Visitors are asked to provide their answer by placing a plastic chip in one of a range of boxes which provide some possibilities. Overwhelmingly, people have chosen to place their chip in the ‘Government’ box. We hope that, as a result of coming to this exhibition, visitors have understood the significance of military care and welfare as an issue for society in the civil war period as well as in the modern day.

The exhibition highlights the human costs of the catastrophe of Civil War.