

# Battle-Scarred: Surgery, Medicine and Military Welfare during the British Civil Wars

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



Replica bullet extractor, as used by civil-war surgeons.



The 'welfare' room: one of the four exhibition rooms in the exhibition, Battle-Scarred

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

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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.



Seal of the Committee for Maimed Soldiers, from the collection of Dr Eric Gruber von Arni





Curators Dr Andrew Hopper (left) and Dr Eric Gruber von Arni (right) with the wheelchair of 'Black Tom' Fairfax, the parliamentary commander-in-chief.

Parliament's efforts to provide pensions to the widows and orphans of its servicemen was revolutionary; for the first time the government considered a group of women to be part of the political nation, having shared in the sacrifices made for the 'Good Old Cause'.

Although the Civil Wars were fought over three hundred years ago, many of the questions we are researching still bear relevance to today. Following recent British conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, questions concerning the government's treatment of war widows remain just as pertinent in the twenty first century as they were during the seventeenth. People might be surprised to discover that it was only last year that the British government passed legislation entitling the widows of slain soldiers to remarry and still retain their military pensions.

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### Aim of the exhibition

The 'Battle-Scarred' exhibition builds on a grant from the Wolfson Foundation and dwells on the themes of civil-war medicine, surgery, aftercare and welfare. The exhibition's aims are threefold. Firstly, it hopes to change the public's perception of medical care during the civil-war period. Secondly, it seeks to provide visitors with a small window into the human cost of the British Civil Wars



Speakers from an inaugural conference of the National Civil War Centre on 7–8 August 2015. This conference was organised by the authors. Entitled 'Mortality, Care and Military Welfare during the British Civil Wars' it provided the inspiration for the Battle-Scarred exhibition that followed.

and to consider how the consequences of such wars persisted well beyond the peace treaties and settlements that concluded them. Finally, in the wake of more recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, it seeks to encourage visitors to reflect on what we can learn today about medical and welfare practices from our seventeenth-century forebears.

The exhibition highlights the human costs of the catastrophe of Civil War. It focuses on the practitioners and patients, the servicemen and their families, by highlighting the efforts to save human lives during this disaster. It endeavours to challenge a popular misconception that seventeenth-century medical treatments were incompetent and ineffective, that medical practice was riddled with charlatans and quack doctors, and that in an age lacking modern antibiotics, those suffering from infection were doomed. Instead it points to some medical and surgical treatments that were effective, along with the establishment of the first permanent military hospitals by the Long Parliament at the Savoy and Ely House in London, where the patients enjoyed decent diets, laundered clean bedding and the administrations of a professional staff.

## “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 practise your 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 'Who 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.



Important items on display in the exhibition related to Sir Thomas Fairfax, Commander in Chief of the Parliamentary New Model Army.

### PhD students Stewart and Hannah's experiences of Battle-scarred

Working on the 'Battle-Scarred' exhibition at the National Civil War Centre provided us PhD students with a unique opportunity to present our research to a wider, public audience. Working within a team of academic advisors and museum staff was a stimulating experience; we were able to see first-hand the various processes of designing and constructing an exhibition.

We both attended meetings at the Centre in Newark over the course of several months as the exhibition went through its various planning stages. This team of academics and museum staff worked together to discuss the initial ideas, themes and aims for the exhibition, where there was a strong emphasis on engaging visitors by linking themes to the modern day. Many of the people in the room had contributed new and exciting academic scholarship to the field of military care in the Civil Wars which in turn informed the content and structure of the exhibition.

The team decided to include a range of panels and objects which would be initially taken on by various members of the team. Therefore, we both had the opportunity to write panel text for the exhibition and to select objects to display. It was an interesting, as well as challenging, experience to construct text that was appropriate for the large range of visitors who attend the museum and to condense all of our ideas into short 200 word pieces.

We were also part of discussions about exhibition planning, and it was fascinating to learn from this very practical aspect; to begin to visualise how the spaces would look once they were filled. On opening night we finally saw everything in its place and were able to share with other guests the first experience of the exhibition in reality.

The exhibition has been supported by one of the University of Leicester's Research Impact Development Fund awards, with evaluation and public engagement co-ordinated by MA students from the Centre for Museum Studies. The curatorial team based at the Centre for English Local History are:

Dr Andrew Hopper, Senior Lecturer in English Local History

Dr Eric Gruber von Arni, Honorary Visiting Fellow

Dr Maureen Harris, Honorary Visiting Fellow

Dr Mandy de Belin, Honorary Visiting Fellow

Stewart Beale AHRC-Funded Midlands Three Cities Doctoral Student

Hannah Worthen AHRC-Funded Collaborative Doctoral Partnership Student (with the National Archives)