

# **Away from the Western Front Project Report**

## **Summary of project**

### **Partners involved**

**Away from the Western Front**

**The National Trust, Sandham Memorial Chapel**

**Alabaré UK, Homes for Veterans**

**Artist-facilitator – Susan Francis**

### **Methods of Evaluation**

- Group discussion at the beginning of the project to assess what knowledge and understanding of World War I campaigns the group already had.
- Recordings taken of each session and comments extracted and used in formative evaluation.
- Discussions held with staff and evaluation forms given out.
- Final session discussing experience of the project and knowledge gained with group members.

### **Aims of the project**

History is often viewed as a collection of rigid facts when actually it is more of a fluid and living medium which comes to life when seen through the lens and experience of individuals and contemporary situations. The aim of the project was not only to pass on the history surrounding the Salonika campaign and the experience of those that fought there, but, with the help and inspiration of Stanley Spencer's work and the life story of Harry Sandham, to gather and disseminate contemporary responses from modern day veterans through a variety of creative processes and mediums. These responses were subsequently displayed in Sandham Memorial Chapel to coincide with their spring opening in March 2018, giving the visiting audience, and those who visit the project site online, a further and perhaps more nuanced understanding of the Salonika story.

It was decided to engage a group of veterans living in supported housing by Alabaré UK, an organisation providing homes for veterans who are either experiencing or facing homelessness. The veterans involved would inevitably have a complex mix of issues, generally mental-health problems, drug and alcohol addiction, in some rare cases none of these, but in most, a combination of all of them. This raised particular

challenges: how to motivate and involve a group of mostly male veterans from a demographic which is well-known to be extremely difficult to engage; how to find continuity in the project when people's lives are often chaotic and of little structure; and most particularly, how to capture creative individual responses from a group with little or no artistic experience or skills, very low confidence and who were perhaps more used to following instructions from others.

On the flipside, the gains to be had from working with this group were great. To be given the responsibility, when you inhabit perhaps the lowest rung of society, with the lack of confidence and opportunity to have your voice heard that that brings, to carry forward the history of Salonika and to share that with other people, would be an unimaginably significant thing and one which they would greatly value. To create art work which would then be seen and respected by others was also hugely important and in return the project would get to capture a very rich and unique response from individuals who have a particular understanding of the Salonika story.

### **Project plan**

- August/September 2017 - Two initial house meetings to meet group, plan logistics and evaluate potential participants in regard to knowledge of World War one, experience of art, enthusiasm for project, military background etc
- Late October - Begin weekly workshops to study the history of the campaign, to explore Stanley Spencer's artwork and experiment with a variety of art media.
- November - Have visit/talk from Alan Wakefield, IWM expert on Salonika.
- November - Have a trip to Sandham Memorial Chapel to view paintings etc
- December to January 18 - To continue workshops to develop artwork in response to the Salonika campaign, finishing off work in late January/February ready for exhibition.
- Early March - Launch of final exhibition followed by evaluation

Past experience suggested that a different approach was required with this particular group who have particularly low confidence and need more time perhaps to get to know the artist and feel comfortable before taking part. As such the workshops were spread out over a number of weeks from the beginning of November to the end of January. Two informal meetings were held in the house to build interest prior to the project, to allow me to gain a better understanding of the general running of the place and to let people (participants and staff) get to know me a little better. These were well attended, as far as normal house meetings go, and staff provided a room at the back of the building where we could hold our workshops.

The house itself holds around about eight individuals at a time with contacts with two further houses in the area. In the end eight in total took part, either for a limited time, due to circumstance, or throughout the entire project. One was no longer resident in the house and another moved on towards the end of the project but returned for the weekly group sessions. It soon became apparent that the other houses were more 'move on' houses and therefore people often had jobs and were less able to consider attending. I set up a regular Thursday morning slot on a weekly basis in the house itself so that people would get used to knowing the workshops were on, and where they could find me. These workshops were punctuated by two special days, firstly by a visit from Alan Wakefield from the Imperial War Museum, and Chairman of the Salonika Campaign Society, who brought individual items for the group to handle, and secondly, by a visit to Sandham Memorial Chapel itself, about half way through the project.

It was planned that the work would be finished by mid-January so that remaining time could be spent putting the exhibition together and tying up any loose ends with participants.

In addition to the veterans, two others engaged with the projects in Salisbury. The Alabaré house manager, Debbie Britton, herself a veteran, took part in the development of the project and encouraged veterans to join although she herself never actually managed to attend a full session and after a few weeks was signed off sick for the remainder of the project. Guy Wilkinson, the local chaplain, who was new to the job, joined in a couple of sessions and, with a personal knowledge of the geographical area and the history of the tensions there, was a welcome and useful addition to group discussions.

## Demographic table

Name	Age *	Gender	Ethnic Background	Socio economic group	Disability
Oli Hulland	40's	M	White British	In supported hostel for homeless veterans who have either been street homeless, sofa surfing or facing homelessness	None of the below have distinct physical disabilities, although all have health issues. All will have some level of mental health issues from mild to quite significant. Most but not all have drug and/or

					alcohol dependency which contributes to physical and mental health issues - conditions such as epilepsy, nerve damage in hands, memory problems etc
Tony Kirwin	40's	M	White British	"	"
Helen Chivers	50's	F	White British	"	"
Mark Rivers	30's	M	White British	"	"
Mathew Varomua	30's	M	Fijian	"	"
Matthew Childs	50's	M	White British	"	"
Sam McLaughlin	30's	M	White British	"	"
'Chef' Steve	50's	M	White British	"	"

## Qualitative evaluation

### Knowledge and Understanding of the Salonika Campaign – Learning new things

We began the project by discussing an overview of the Salonika campaign and talking about areas the participants had experienced themselves in their military career. In the first session we put a 'scratch' map up on the wall where participants could scratch out the areas they had being stationed in and also scratch out the area of the Salonika campaign. I also downloaded the recordings from veterans who had returned from Salonika and arranged them so that each week took us from the beginning to the end of the campaign, with a snippet of their conversation to listen to and discuss together each week.

We had a copy of the Salonika Campaign Society's journal, 'The Mosquito', and various extracts from diaries and letters for the group to look at and I left these in our specified workshop area of the house so that they could look at them if they wished during the week. Each week we started the session with the recorded voices which set the scene again and took people back into the narrative. At four weeks in we had a visit from Alan Wakefield from the Imperial War Museum. He came with items for handling and a slideshow of the history of the campaign. I was pleased that we had positioned it at this point as by now the group were familiar with the history and as such were really excited to handle items from the battlefield. We set up a

quick photography station and they each took lots of photographs with their phones etc, making sure they each got all of the items Alan had brought, a testament to how engaged they were.



Following this session we had the actual trip to Sandham Memorial Chapel. We took a small group of veterans, Helen, Mathew, Matthew and Tony, plus a member of staff, Andrea. This was a really successful day out and a great bonding session between staff and housemates. Here is an extract from the notes I took.

*'It was clear that the group were very absorbed and moved by the paintings in situ. They all spent a long time in silence just looking at all the detail and taking in the atmosphere. It was a very special time and I was so pleased that they reacted so strongly to the work. Matthew, who hadn't heard as much about the paintings as the others, hadn't really known what to expect and they made a deep impression on him.*



*He noted how there was no violence there at all and that this had not been what he had expected. **'It's just how they lived, how they got by'**. He described the lack of weapons and violence as **'refreshing'**. They were all very interested to tie up the things they knew about the Salonika campaign with the scenes in the paintings and I felt that doing so much research before we did this trip, listening to recordings, reading letters etc, just made the paintings have even more impact when they finally saw them.'*

When I visited the following week, Oli who had been ill the week before and unable to come to the trip told me that Matthew had come in when he returned, sat on his bed, and **'talked for hours about the paintings'** they had made such an impression on him. This made Oli determined to come on the next trip when the exhibition opens. Tony also found the trip amazing and said he could spend **'days and days looking at the paintings and it wouldn't be enough to take it all in'**.

All in all, this was definitely a high point of the project.

## **Challenges**

It has to be pointed out though that not all the group came to each of these sessions and it often waxed and waned between anything from a couple to the full group. I knew this would be the case as people's lives are very chaotic and health is very fragile but we worked with this, giving those that had come to the group the week before, particularly on Alan's visit and the trip to Sandham, the job of relaying their knowledge to the others the following week, which helped embed it in everyone's mind and also boosted the confidence of those with that responsibility.

The combination of these approaches, and the constant circling back over past sessions, embedding what they had learnt before, meant the group was confident about their knowledge of Salonika. When asked did they feel that they now knew enough about the campaign and were they equipped enough to pass it on to others, they all agreed including Mathew who said emphatically, **'Definitely.'** He also said, **'I didn't know much about it until I got involved with you, then I get to know the story.'**

Oli said about Stanley Spencer **'He expressed a totally different aspect of war that you wouldn't expect, that was the predominant thing about it. No bayonets, no-one shot through the head...all regular everyday things, in what wasn't a regular, everyday situation.'**

## **Summary of improvements in knowledge and understanding as a result of taking part in this project**

- Knowledge of Salonika campaign, and wider WW1 history
- Knowledge of ongoing support for soldiers and the history of the Salonika Society
- Geographical knowledge of the area
- Knowledge of artist, Stanley Spencer's work
- Wider knowledge of art criticism, (understanding symbolism and representational issues in artwork ie what is beauty, how do we measure what is good art?)

## Skills gained

Participants were able to develop new skills as part of the project.

## General skills

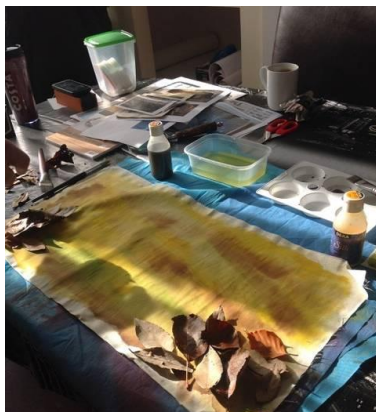
- Discussing ideas together and listening to each others' contributions
- Reflecting on the history and offering their own observations from that
- Developing an idea from initial thoughts through to completed work
- Confidence gained in their own choices and interpretations of work  
***I'm going to use yellow (for Autumn), 'cause it's bright and happy...and that is what they would have been thinking of in that cold, dreaming of being back home, back with their families'*** - Mark
- Team building and working towards a shared goal

## Artistic skills

- Mono printing



- Silk dye painting



- Photo layering apps



- Photography (composition)



- Using photo transfers



- They also gained skills in critiquing art, in reading symbolism in art and direct knowledge of Stanley Spencer's work



### **Attitudes and Values – deepening perceptions, feelings and empathy**

This was a particularly complex group living in a challenging environment where everyone was facing some level of crisis in their lives. Despite this they showed great respect for each other and for myself as the group facilitator during the project. During the first session we discussed whether we should have set of group rules but everyone decided together that this was not necessary as they each trusted each other to behave appropriately during the group sessions and if any problems arose they would deal with them sensitively.

Exploring the Salonika history raised quite a few emotions and the group had great empathy with the plight of the troops in such difficult and distressing conditions. They particularly identified with the possible mental health issues returning soldiers would have had, and talked at length how they would have been treated in those days and how it is only recently that they feel there is support for mental-health illness in the army now.

***‘They didn’t have jobs, they had nothing – no support – there was no understanding of mental health, they were just written off’.*** – Tony.

Helen also added the further distress caused to the rest of the family,

***‘It wasn’t just them, the ones coming back, the whole family was broken (by the experience)’*** – Helen

She also reflected on the changes in society that took place as a result of the collective experience of war

***‘Working in service went out of fashion, people didn’t want to do it any more, because they saw rich people with butlers and all that and thought – well, they realised (after the war), these people were no better than them’***

They also deeply identified with the feelings of isolation and loss of direction when leaving the army and this became a theme we went back to a number of times.

***‘I think that feeling of abandonment is standard’*** Oli

***‘When they came back, you can relate that to us lot leaving the army, that’s the point when you feel completely lost, alone, abandoned and they felt that on a much greater scale than we did.’*** Oli

The group also reflected on the symbol of the poppy, which is very important to them, and one they selected often in their work, particularly the white poppy, which has come to symbolise peace. I wanted them to reflect quite deeply on this rather

than just use it as an obvious image so we talked at length about the idea of 'being the hero', of the various charities and how they operate, and whether the poppy still has its original significance. Mark was somewhat uncomfortable with the term 'Help for Heroes' and felt that people with physical injuries were seen as heroes because the problems were easy to see, but perhaps not those with the mental-health injuries.

***'We're less visible as 'heroes', just cause we don't have legs hanging off, but we might be a bit tapped up here' (pointing to his head). Mark***

The group also reacted strongly to the accounts of the physical discomfort of the troops.

***'Them saying they got on with it, is different from us lot saying that - in us comfortable beds, carpeted billets but them - knee high in mud, frost bite etc, 'they just got by', well, that's a different sort of getting by - Gosh! It must have been horrific' Oli***

### **Summary**

In summary, the group became more reflective and understanding of the issues faced by those fighting and returning home in WW1, enabling them to compare their own experiences and draw from them to empathise with the enormous struggles soldiers and their families experienced. They began to view history as a living thing, with real people at the centre of the events. As far as the art was concerned they now have a greater understanding of what art can be and how different media and interpretations are of value. They also now see themselves as capable of creating art and all said they would be more confident to sign up to a similar project in the future.

### **Inspiration and creative thinking – leading to enjoyment, openness to new ideas**

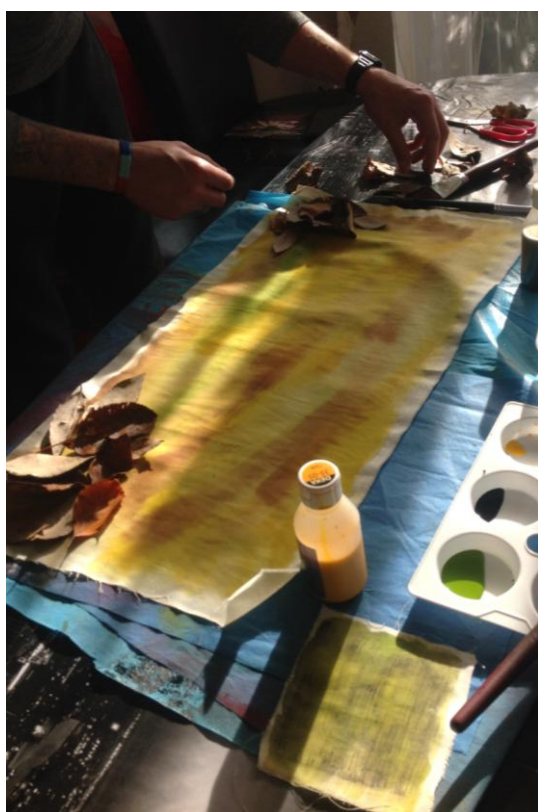
The participants were initially very daunted at the idea of producing art or generating ideas for the project. It was a particular criterion of the project that each participant would develop their own individual response in a medium that suited them. This was perhaps particularly challenging for a group of veterans who were used to being given clear instructions rather than free rein to follow through their own ideas. By the end of the project however, they were quite confident to propose ideas and to reflect on their own and each other's work, looking for symbolism and crossovers that would communicate the message they wanted to get across. We talked at length initially about the possibilities for the exhibition and I brought in a range of collage materials for them to experiment with. This demographic is particularly difficult to engage in making and continuity of planning and committing to a long drawn out making process is a particular challenge. As such it was really a matter of capturing periods of activity when they happened and making the most of them. We began the project by making personal boxes to contain any future work or

gather source material etc. Stanley Spencer had referred to Sandham Memorial Chapel as 'his holy box' so it seemed appropriate that each person would have their own box for the project.



Over the weeks we experimented with a number of techniques such as mono printing, felting, silk dye painting, collage with photographic transfers and a combination of these. The monoprinting was particularly popular, so much so that Tony, who had recently moved on from Alabaré and was back with his own family, purchased his own equipment and materials so that he could carry on at home and brought them in each week. A couple of people went on to combine some of the techniques and skills they had learnt together, preparing backgrounds with silk dyes which they either monoprinted or collaged over the top.





As the weeks went on each person settled into their own work, some drawing, some painting and others felting etc. Mark really enjoyed working with colour, paint and collage and went outside searching for natural materials to use. Here is some of his work alongside his comments.

***'I want my work to be about peace, 'cause that's what they (troops in Salonika) wanted – we should be living in peace, not war.'***

***'I think it's sweet, we should have this stuff out all the time so that we can just come in and play with it whenever we want.'*** Mark

Mark was very excited about his work and got me to leave the materials he needed so that he could carry on during the week.



Helen worked with silk dyes and monoprint but eventually settled on felting and worked very hard on this, developing three small pieces over a number of weeks. She commented

***'Art is therapeutic – I think it's because you can lose yourself, I'm definitely going to get some paint and fabric myself'***



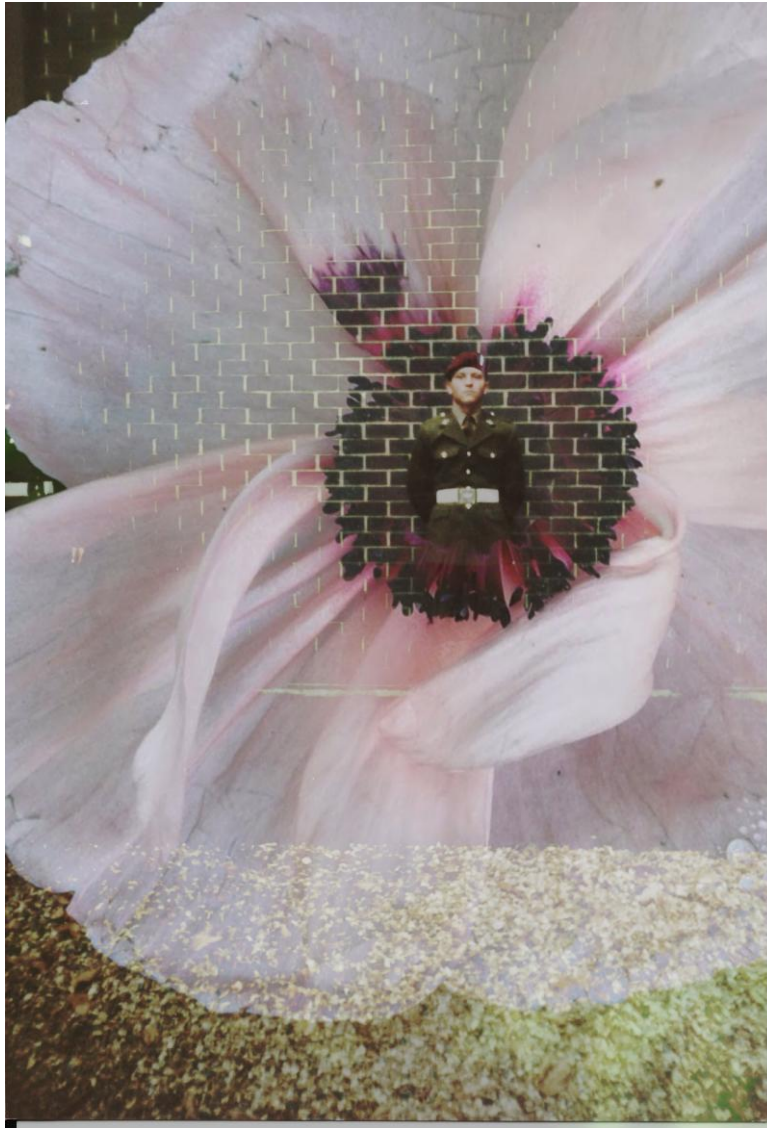
Towards the end of the project Helen, who also attends a local monthly art group, told the others that she knows now that, even when she's not feeling like it, she must force herself to come along to a group, as she knows that, once she gets there and gets started, it will help her to feel better in the long run. Helen is currently trying to encourage Oli, as they have got to know each other more over the project, to join her local art group with her.



Oli had particularly struggled and felt very under-confident about coming up with some artistic response. He had a video of an injury he had sustained which he thought he may be able to use so I took some stills from the video and uploaded them to an iPad with a number of other images that interested him. I gave him a little bit of instruction on how to use the photo layering / montaging app and let him play with the photographs. We discussed the symbolism that emerged when one photo was layered over another and Oli began to enjoy producing some himself. He went around the house taking photographs and also travelled to Devizes where he brought back his old photographs of when he was in service. This became Oli's medium, providing him with a way in to making images that he was happy with.

### Therapeutic outcomes

- Relaxation - often participants could be agitated, dealing with ongoing pain, stress, depression and withdrawal symptoms. Focusing on the work in a supportive atmosphere, often listening to relaxing music in the background, helped people relax and have some precious time to escape from the issues they were going through.  
Oli remarked, *'I won't need to go to mindfulness because this is so relaxing,'*
- Confidence building - having opinions listened to, learning new skills and having their contribution valued as an individual is quite powerful. Oli attending the opening, having interviews with newspapers etc and being congratulated was a huge experience for him.
- Relationship building - working together with a shared objective, concentrating on artwork and sharing experiences allows for supportive and respectful relationships and friendships to build, something which can be quite difficult in a house like this where everyone is wrapped up in their own crisis, staying in their rooms for long periods and wary of new residents.
- **'Building up a bank of good experiences to help counteract the weight of the bad ones.'** This is a quote from a friend who runs a charity for rehabilitation and perfectly sums up the simple benefit of a project such as this.
- Professor Tischler of Nottingham University also speaks of a shift in identity i.e., the ability of a project such as this to enable people to move away, in their minds, *'from a label of 'homeless' or alcoholic', to a label of 'artist',* even for just a short time, as Oli did particularly, at the exhibition opening.



***'I'm thrilled, I think what we've produced together is amazing, just amazing.'*** Oli

Following the Christmas period, which had been really low point in the house in general, I decided to try something completely different and brought in photography equipment, a small projector and an iPad filled with the images they had collected and created over the last few weeks. Oli, Mathew, Helen and Ken, (who had not participated before but had been watching round the edges), all met together in the front room, a change of venue, and with a little encouragement and instruction on how to use the equipment, worked together to stage a number of photographs. This was a real highlight of the project as everyone contributed on an equal footing and really enjoyed the session, working as a creative team. A lot of experimenting went on, some taking the camera while others posed and made suggestions etc, then all swapping round, discussing with each other the themes that could be conveyed by combining the projections with the furniture and their own bodies. Ken had previous experience of photography and had once owned an SLR camera so was particularly interested in the medium. Reflecting back on the sessions in the penultimate workshop Helen commented, ***'I don't think there is a single person who has been to one of these that hasn't enjoyed it.'***

## **Summary of examples of creativity and inspirational thinking**

- Experimenting with materials beyond traditional uses, trying out new combinations
- Suggesting compositions for projection images and trying ideas out.
- Bringing in their own materials (i.e., the leaves etc) and photographs to use
- Recognising the potential of 'accidental' successes with media and incorporating these

## **SOCIAL MEDIA**

Tweets were sent out with images after every session and Robin Clutterbuck updated the project blog. Participants loved the blog entries, Oli forwarding the link to his mother in Spain, ***'I'm really proud, really proud of it..I think we've done a really good job, all of us, I think it's great.'*** Oli

## **LAUNCH**

The launch was a really positive day. As often happens with these difficult and vulnerable groups we had just one veteran representing the group due to circumstance, family demands and staffing issues at Alabaré. Two of Alabaré's management staff did attend though and discussed arrangements to bring trustees to see the show at a later date. Oli represented the group and had not been able to attend before due to illness anxiety etc so was particularly keen to see the chapel paintings at last. He was enthralled by the artwork, noticing all the events and details of the Salonika campaign in the paintings and spent quite some time in the chapel. A good number attended the opening and Oli had to cope with press interviews and various photograph sessions. ***'I'm really proud, really, really proud,'*** he said. He coped very well with all of this, enjoyed a huge lunch and returned with spare sandwiches to share with the rest of the house. Staffs at the house have reported that he had a 'wonderful day' and I will be going to visit them shortly with a copy of the newspaper article for them and to show everyone the photos.

## **EXHIBITION**

The exhibition is a mixed media installation with some sound recordings of conversation between participants, framed work on the walls, a long strip of the projection photos and various items on the desk i.e., a veterans' filing cabinet drawer with quotes from WW1 soldiers and the modern day veterans, often almost interchangeable. It has been reported from Jane at Sandham Memorial Chapel that the room had had little focus to the displays before and now, people were spending much longer in there.





Susan Francis 16.4.18