

Changing lives: from biscuit tin to archive – photo reunites family

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A single photograph in an old biscuit tin was the only connection Margaret Eason had to her father's side of the family until a newspaper article set her on the road to a life-changing personal discovery.

Margaret knew only three things about her great uncle Arthur Corner – he was a teacher, he fought and died during the First World War and her father was named after him.

So a photograph of Arthur and his brother Frank with their fellow Pals of the 18th Battalion of the Durham Light Infantry was a treasured link to an unknown past.

After reading about an open day in a local newspaper, Margaret took the photo to the Durham County Record Office which was collecting material for the Durham at War project. Supported by HLF, the project links people, archives, sites and objects across the county to build a picture of communities during the First World War.

"I was actually able to read Arthur's words – it felt as though Arthur was reading with me over my shoulder."

- Margaret

Margaret explains what happened next: “They immediately recognised his name and showed me his biography on the [Durham at War website](#) – I had no idea it was there and it was truly an emotional ‘Who Do You Think You Are?’ moment. They then brought out a tiny diary dated 1916 and I was actually able to read Arthur’s words – it felt as though he was reading with me over my shoulder.”

Discovering more than a family tree

Delighted with her discovery, Margaret’s thoughts turned to where the diary could have come from. To her surprise, it was revealed that Norma and Brian Corner (relatives she hadn’t known existed) had not only donated the diary but were also active volunteers for the project.

“I feel so lucky to have found them,” Margaret says. “I had arrived at the Record Office with a photo of a relative who died 100 years ago not expecting to learn much more than I already knew; but to my delight and exceeding all expectations, I’d been shown his biography and his diary and then had the opportunity to meet living relatives of Arthur.”

The Corners had spent a long time putting together a family tree and were keen to share it with Margaret: “It’s a work of Homeric proportions... I learned from it that my Grandmother Corner was the eldest of 13 children when I’d only heard of three including her.”

Margaret, Norma and Brian are all still volunteers for the Durham at War project and met for the very first time this month. Margaret hopes to meet the rest of the Corner family at a reunion later this year.

“When I retired, after the initial euphoria wore off and failing to master the ukulele, I was lost without a purpose, I was off the grid. Now I’m plugged in again.”

As for the man in the 100-year-old photograph, Margaret can finally share his story. “I know so much more about Arthur now and I am so grateful and proud that all the people who visit the website and look for his name, Arthur Henry Corner, will know about him too. I know now that he was fatally wounded on the first day of the Battle of the Somme; that he died 10 days later aged 22 in hospital in Chichester and is buried near his home where I can visit him and leave some flowers on the 1 July – the centenary of the first day of the Battle of the Somme.”

The photo is now permanently out of the biscuit tin.

While looking through an archive collection, Margaret realised what the mysterious number 126 written on the bottom meant. “There in the display book was an empty space between photographs 125 and 127, and I’m very proud to say that Uncle Arthur Corner, his brother Frank and his Pals of the 18th Battalion, Durham Light Infantry, are now part of that treasured photographic record.”

Finding a new purpose

Involvement in the Durham at War project means a great deal to Margaret: “When I retired, after the initial euphoria wore off, and failing to master the ukulele, I was lost without a purpose, I was off the grid. Now I’m plugged in again; logging and blogging and loving it.”

All thanks to a single photograph in an old biscuit tin and a little help from National Lottery players.

“While we might not all win the jackpot, all of us who play the National Lottery are changing lives like mine for the better – what are the odds on that?”

The photo from the biscuit tin

Norma and Brian Corner with Margaret

Arthur Corner's 1916 diary

Norma and Margaret with photo of Arthur

Margaret and Norma

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