

FINDING  
FIRST WORLD-WAR  
EPHEMERA

A FIELD GUIDE

# WHAT IS THE STORY BEHIND THIS GUIDE?



This guide was written by Dr Ann-Marie Foster as part of the project ‘Ephemera and writing about war in Britain, 1914 to the present’, a collaborative research project carried out by researchers at Northumbria University and the University of Exeter. It was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council. Illustrations by Felicity Tattersall. Design and layout by Roger Newbrook.



## Copyright statement

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# ~ WHAT IS THIS GUIDE? ~

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Finding ephemera can be difficult, since they are not well signposted in archives and other collections. This guide – which works like a manual or toolkit – is meant to help anyone, expert or layperson, locate First World War ephemera. Hopefully, it will help you direct your searches, and give you the knowledge to find ephemera relevant to your research needs.

While this guide is primarily about finding First World War ephemera, a lot of the tips are appropriate for many research topics.

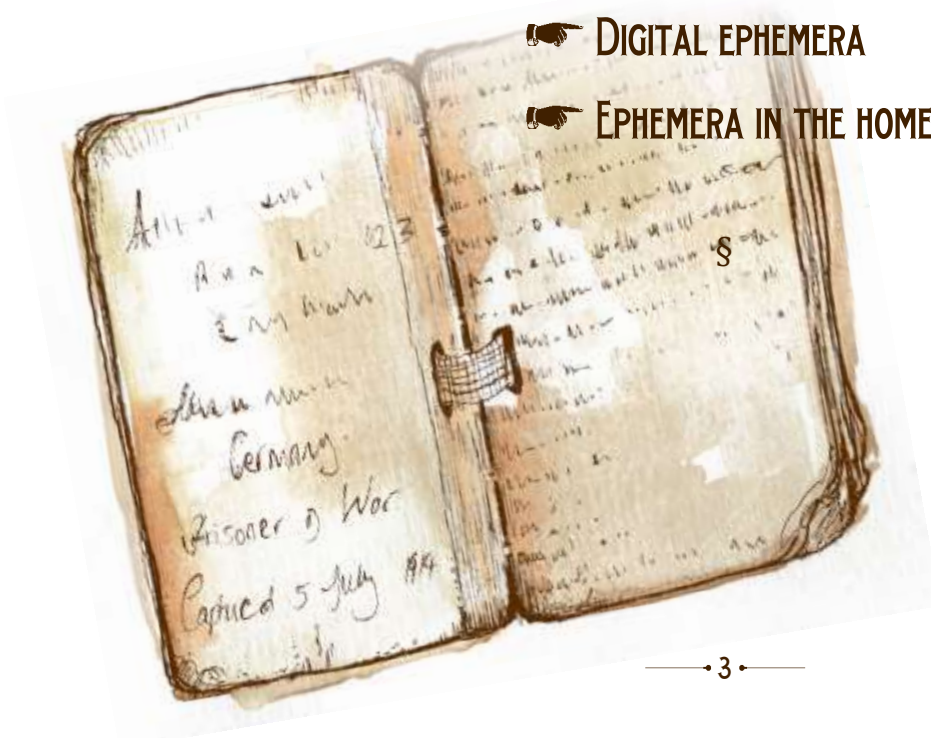
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## THIS GUIDE COVERS:

👉 ARCHIVAL COLLECTIONS

👉 DIGITAL EPHEMERA

👉 EPHEMERA IN THE HOME



# ~ EPHEMERA ~

## WHAT IS IT AND WHERE IS IT?



Ephemera are small pieces of paper and movable personal objects. These can range from things like letters, receipts, posters, postcards, to items such as medals, pocket watches, napkins, silk scarves, and pieces of uniform.

Ephemera is most commonly found in three places:

### 1. IN PHYSICAL ARCHIVES, MUSEUMS, AND LIBRARIES



### 2. IN DIGITAL FORMAT ON THE INTERNET

### 3. IN PEOPLE'S HOUSES.

This guide will briefly take you through all three categories.

We assume that you have a rough idea of the sort of thing you want to find in an archive. This can be anything from a photograph of a regiment, to an object, or items about a certain event or battle, or place. The key when trying to find any archival item, but ephemera in particular, is to think quite broadly about the 'search words' you will use to try and find these items. In general, the broader the term the better. See the tips section for examples.

It is worth noting that finding ephemera can take time and resources. Access to the internet is important as you will need it to scope collections and contact archives. Indeed, this guide is only available via the web! You may have to travel to see documents, or pay to have them sent to you. There are, however, a lot of freely accessible digital archives which will hopefully have some of the material you require.

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# ~ ARCHIVAL COLLECTIONS ~



Most ephemeral material can be found in archives, museums, and libraries. At the bottom of this guide is the suggestion of a few sites to get you started on searching for likely places to look, but before you start looking around there are some things that are worth knowing, so you can direct your search!

Usually, you will be able to find what you're looking for on an archive website. Most archives, museums, and libraries will have a digital catalogue which tells you what they have in their institution. Be sensible with your searches. For example, if you're looking for ephemera from a certain regiment, try the appropriate regimental museum first. If you're looking for items from a particular event, try a national archive, such as Imperial War Museums and narrow down from there.

The key to understanding where and how to find ephemera is through understanding how archives, museums, and libraries document the material they look after.

The most important thing to know is that not all ephemera archives are created equal. Briefly, different archives, museums and libraries were set up differently, have different collecting priorities (i.e. not all archives collect all things), and have different levels of staffing. Archives, museums, and libraries know what they have by cataloguing items. Most places where you might find ephemera will not have catalogued everything. Institutions range from having an idea of what is in a box of ephemera (and so can provide a box-level description of its content) to knowing item by item what is in its storage. This information may or may not be available online (!). Sometimes the catalogues are only available when you visit in-person. E-mail ahead to double check before booking a slot in the Research Room.

The same is true for how the content is described. There's been a move in recent years to provide catalogue descriptions of items that use decolonised, queer, and non-discriminatory language. However, you may find outdated and discriminatory words in the catalogues you are looking through. Sometimes archives offer warnings and explanations about what terminology is used about the collection (for example, because there is no modern equivalent term).

Most archives, museums, and libraries have created 'collection guides' which will help you understand what the archive has and how to access it, so it's worth spending some time looking at their website to try and find this information.

A final thing that's worth knowing when approaching archives and ephemera is that ephemera in archives can be classed or documented differently depending on who set up the archive. As the traditional understanding of ephemera is paper based, and you will find that some items are stricter than others. For example, many libraries only class 'printed ephemera' as ephemera. What this means is that only things like forms, posters, and official documents are classed as ephemera. Items such as handwritten letters would go into manuscript collections, and any physical objects might end up in another building or archive completely (!). For example, a collection of certificates from a vegetable growing competition held at Le Havre during the First World War are held in the British Library, but the medals that were awarded to the winners are in Imperial War Museums!





# ~ DIGITAL EPHEMERA ~

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Many of you might be lucky, and in your searches find that the ephemera you want to see is available online. First World War historians are in for a particular treat with this category of ephemera. Over the centenary of the war a lot of major cultural organisations digitised pieces from their war collections.

Digital collections allow you to see items from your home or library, and are an excellent way of finding information that it might otherwise be too expensive to access. Do be aware, however, that digitised collections are often only the tip of the iceberg of what an archive, museum, or library holds. There may well be far more ephemera in their stores that has not been digitised.

Searching for digitised ephemera can be tricky. Depending on the catalogue, the item description may or may not be detailed. For example, a photograph of a Pals Battalion, or a working-class nurse, or a Black British soldier might simply be described as 'photograph'. To get the material you want you may have to spend quite a bit of time (and patience) trawling through your search results.

Approaching digital archives is very similar to the above – recognising that different archives hold different things, and that they may not always be extremely well catalogued, can really help direct your search. See below for some tips that will help with searching for items to view.

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# ~ SEARCH TIPS ~

## FOR ARCHIVES, MUSEUMS, LIBRARIES, AND DIGITAL COLLECTIONS



### 1. KNOW YOUR EPHEMERA TERMS BUT BE FLEXIBLE AND INVENTIVE IN YOUR SEARCH TERMS!

Dictionaries, which can be found in many public libraries, will help you recognise technical terms for ephemera. One of the most comprehensive is Maurice Rickard's *Encyclopedia of Ephemera*. However, when searching in an archive or digitised collection, be aware that the item you're searching for might not have been catalogued under a specific term, so use multiple searches to try and refine your selection!

### 2. KNOW YOUR METADATA

This is very similar to the above point. Digitised collections can have the same item under many different names. For example, on one website a Next of Kin Memorial Plaque is called a 'death penny' a 'dead man's penny' and a 'Next of Kin Memorial Plaque' – searching for each term will come up with different results!

### 3. IF IN DOUBT, ASK!

Archivists are more than happy to answer queries if you're getting stuck. If you're struggling, a polite email to the archive never goes amiss. Just be aware that it might take some time for them to think through your query and respond.

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## ~ EPHEMERA IN YOUR HOUSE ~



Depending on your ancestor's experiences, your own family can sometimes be a good source of ephemera. This section will not be applicable to everyone, but some of you may have ephemera at your fingertips! If anyone in your family has developed an interest in genealogy, they might be able to point you in the direction of your family archives.

If there is no family history expert, a good place to look for material is in a relative's attic or boxes of papers. Boxes of family papers can often be split and moved over time, and so the majority of your family archive from the First World War may not be in your immediate family, but in the house of a distant cousin.

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# ~ CONSERVING EPHEMERA ~



As these ephemera are kept in the home, you may want to take special measures to ensure that they are kept in the best possible condition so they can be enjoyed for years to come.

If you have paper items you want to conserve, the US National Archives have a thorough guide to preserving papers, which is available here:

 <https://www.archives.gov/preservation/family-archives>

There is also a good guide which has been produced by Glamorgan Archives:

 <https://glamarchives.gov.uk/collection/conservation/>

If you want to know more about keeping your objects safe, the 'British Jews in the First World War, We Were There Too' website has an excellent section about conserving material. It can be found here:

 <https://www.jewsfww.uk/preserving-your-artefacts.php>

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# ~ DIGITISED COLLECTIONS ~



The following is a jumping off point rather than an exhaustive list of places that might be of use to you and your research.

## WAR COLLECTIONS:

**Imperial War Museums –**

 <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections>

**First World War Digital Poetry Archive –**

 <http://ww1lit.nsms.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/collections/show/1>

**Great War to Race Riots –**

 <http://greatwar-to-raceriots.co.uk/>

**British Jews in the First World War, We Were There Too –**

 <https://www.jewsfww.uk/>


**Women and War Wales –**

 <http://www.womenandwar.wales/>



## SOME NOTABLE NON~WAR EPHEMERA COLLECTIONS:

One of the best collections of ephemera in the UK, **The John Johnson Collection of Printed Ephemera**, has digitised some of its items:

 <https://www.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/collections-and-resources/special-collections/catalogues/johnson/finding-aids/digitised>

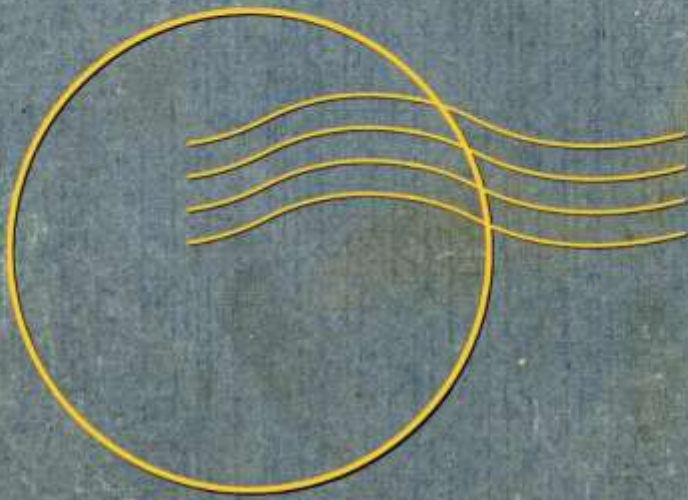
**People's Collection Wales –**

 <https://www.peoplescollection.wales/>

**Beamish People's Collection –**

 <http://collections.beamish.org.uk/>

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