

Real Life

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Story of the month

'Step short!'

Fascinating First World War history has been brought to life again by the discovery of unique soldiers' visitors' books. The Step Short organisation rebound the books, which had been gathering dust for years in Folkestone Council offices.

Sisters Flora and Margaret Jeffry, started a Harbour Canteen providing a free light buffet and tea to anyone in a uniform. In the canteen was a visitor's book, which was signed by many soldiers passing through on the way to the Front.

These visitors' books will be a great source of information for family historians, and they have been placed in the care of the Kent County Archives in Dover.

They tell fascinating personal stories. For instance, one of the signatures in the book belongs to a L/Cpl William Cotter from Sandgate, Nr Folkestone, Kent. William Cotter was awarded the Victoria Cross.

Despite having one of his legs blown off and being wounded in both arms, he had steadied his men, who were in a crater and arranged a counter attack. It was not possible to move him for 14 hours and

unfortunately he died in France. There is also a news cutting of him pasted in one of the books.

A lot of the signatures were done in haste and many are faded. But on one page there is a black feather and photographs.

The Step Short organisation is hoping to digitise the visitors' books as they hold about 42,000 names of soldiers who passed through Folkestone. Work is also underway to make records available on Step Short's website (www.stepshort.co.uk).

Soldiers were often delayed in Folkestone for up to two days when the weather was too poor for the ships to sail across to Boulogne. The first entry in the visitors' book was in June 1915 and included the soldier's name and address. But from volume four (April 1916) onwards, those signing added their name, the date and their regiment. Among those signatures are war poets, dignitaries, the Prince of Wales and Victoria Cross holders.



The visitors' book was signed by thousands of soldiers

Troops destined for the Western Front assembled on The Leas, Folkestone's seaside promenade, above the 150ft cliffs and outside The Grand, a society hotel before the war. They were then marched down the steep Slope Road to the harbour for embarkation. The order "Step Short!" was given because of the severe gradient as the soldiers made their way to the ships waiting below.

Step Short was taken as the name of the organisation, which was established in 2008 to prepare Folkestone for the centenary of the First World War in 2014.

Step Short hopes to raise enough cash to turn these historic books into a permanent record of the men who went off to war from Folkestone nearly 100 years ago, for many, their last act in their home country.

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