Writing First World War Ephemera

A Creative Workshop Toolkit

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~ A Creative Workshop Toolkit ~

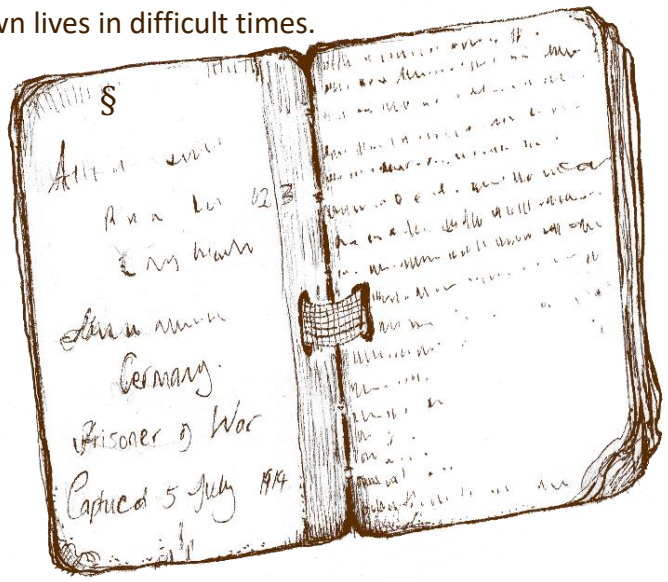
~ Introduction ~

What is the story behind this toolkit?

This toolkit provides ideas and exercises for running creative workshops that use small objects or documents as prompts and/or inspiration. It comes out of a collaborative project titled 'Ephemera and writing about war in Britain, 1914 to the present', which ran from 2021 to 2024 and was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council.

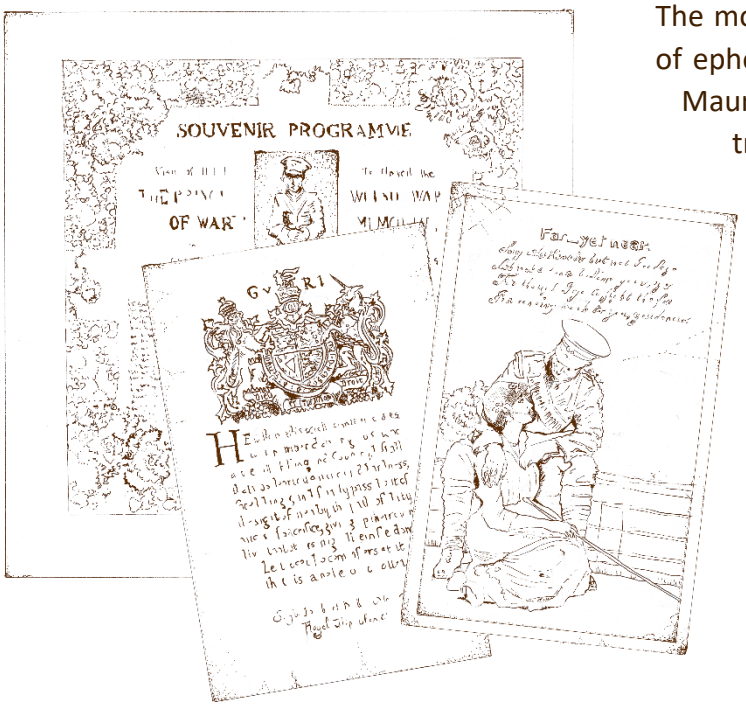
Our project team consisted of one literary scholar (Ann-Marie Einhaus), two creative writers (the novelist and poet Tony Williams and the playwright and scriptwriter May Sumbwanyambe), and three historians (Ann-Marie Foster, Chris Kempshall and Catriona Pennell). The toolkit itself was written by Ann-Marie Einhaus, with input from Tony Williams and Ann-Marie Foster.

We were interested in how ephemera – small paper items and everyday objects, such as ticket stubs, postcards, photos, souvenirs, medals, or small pieces of jewellery – help us think and write about the past and about our own lives in difficult times.



What is 'ephemera'?

This is a bit of a vexed question! Even ephemera specialists (called ephemerists) can't agree whether the word is pronounced 'eff-EM-er-a' or 'EE-fe-mer-ah' (it can be both); whether it is singular or plural (again, it can be both); and whether it includes just printed or also handwritten items (both, depending on who you talk to, although ephemera is usually at least partially printed).



The most commonly used definition of ephemera, coined by ephemerist Maurice Rickards in 1988, is 'minor transient documents of everyday life'. This is generally taken to mean printed or written material not meant to last long-term, although some ephemera, such as a memorial card or a photograph, are meant to survive the test of time. But for our project, we also argued that small everyday objects should be included in our work. Families and archives often combine paper-based ephemera and small objects. So, although some definitions of ephemera are paper-based only, in our research we wanted to include other small, easily portable items which were important to people in the past.

This means that items such as identity tags, luck charms, and even practical items like buttons and hairbrushes are included in our definition of ephemera. As a project team, we adopted a broad understanding of what ephemera are: any small, portable items linked to the First World War and its commemoration counted as ephemera for the purpose of our work. From postcards to photographs, forms to pamphlets, talismans to identity discs, we

understand this material as everyday ephemera which can lead to a clearer understanding of how people felt and remembered the past.

A button in itself doesn't usually have special meaning – but a button from the uniform of a lost loved one, or from a coat worn during an important journey and kept as a memento, can become a meaningful object. It's this connection between object and meaning that we wanted to explore in the context of the history of war.

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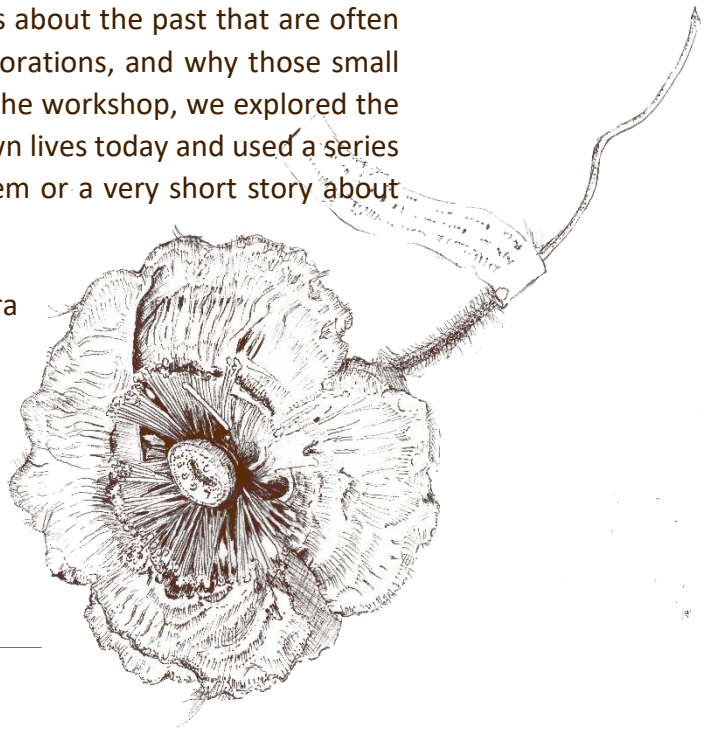
Linking ephemera and creativity?

One of the strands of work we have been pursuing has been to use creative methods to explore how well ephemera can help those wishing to write about war today. As part of the wider project, Tony Williams and May Sumbwanyambe have been producing a novel and a stage play, but we didn't want this to be just an academic endeavour.

So, as part of our project, we ran several creative workshops. In one type of workshop, we moved from object to page to stage: in a series of guided exercises, we used small objects and documents as prompts to 'feel out' a realistic character, and produce a character outline and short speech for this character.

In the second type of workshop, we thought about why and how objects can help us remember stories about the past that are often left out of the big national commemorations, and why those small stories matter. In the second half of the workshop, we explored the importance of small objects to our own lives today and used a series of guided exercises to produce a poem or a very short story about meaningful objects.

For our workshops, we used ephemera related to the First World War as examples. This was partly to do with the remit of our research, and partly with the fact that ephemera



from this war are easily found, either in people's personal possession or in public collections, in many cases in digital form. We give some pointers to where to source diverse ephemera related to the First World War below.

Digitised ephemera can work as well as those we can physically handle, for example if you choose to run a workshop online, though you do lose an element of immediacy. Many digitised paper-based ephemera can be printed to replicate that sense of physical connection.

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~ A NOTE ON CONSIDERING YOUR AUDIENCE ~

War-related ephemera have the advantage that they offer strong emotional hooks, as well as allowing us to think, perhaps at one remove, about the difficult realities we still live with today. At the same time, this is also a potential challenge.

War is, unfortunately, still a part of everyday life, whether directly or indirectly. When tailoring a workshop to your particular group of participants or target audience, do bear in mind any first-hand experience of war they might have, and think about how to deal with this sensitively.

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WHEN THE WAR IS OVER MOTHER DEAR

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Likewise, different political opinions, or different historical links to the war in question might emerge that could potentially lead to tension. For example, imagine you are running a workshop using Second World War British Army medals for a secondary school. The group might contain both students who have ancestors who fought on the Allied side and those who currently have relatives serving in the army. But you might also have students whose ancestry is German, Austrian or Italian, who may feel a little put on the spot. You might have students whose ancestors experienced a very different version of the war in Eastern Europe, Turkey, Greece, or the Middle East, not to mention descendants of Holocaust survivors. Very likely, you will have both pacifist and those convinced of the idea of a just war in the room, and perhaps those who have no family connection to the war at all. You may have a combination of religious and atheist participants. And so on, depending also on where you are delivering the workshop – England, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, or elsewhere in the world. In short, it's easy to see how there might be clashes of opinion.

While these are very real challenges, they needn't put you off running a workshop! It might, however, be a good idea to start the workshop by setting some ground rules in discussion with your participants.

- **What does it take for people to feel safe and respected when discussing war-related items?**
- **Can we assume that everyone feels the same about them?**
- **What does it mean to engage with such items respectfully?**

It's important to stress that any response is valid, as long as it doesn't violate the rights of others or qualifies as hate speech.

Choosing your objects thoughtfully can also help forestall unnecessary conflict. Think about using objects that offer both specific and universal points of connection. A memorial card or napkin might prompt responses specific to a particular location or family background, but as a marker of loss, these kinds of ephemera also speak to anyone who has ever experienced or worried about such loss. A toy or everyday household item likewise taps into universal (or near-universal) levels of experience. Of course, you may want to choose items that are more provocative, especially if you are working with a group who are familiar with you and each other.

In choosing your objects and exercises, do bear in mind different access needs. In general, documents and objects can offer a multitude of opportunities for creative working, especially when working with disabled participants. Many ephemera are highly visual sources, and might not necessarily be suitable for participants with visual impairments. In this instance, other participants can work to create good descriptions, which can feed into the creative process, or you can offer a selection of items that can be handled and approached through other senses such as touch or smell. This could unlock really exciting creative responses!

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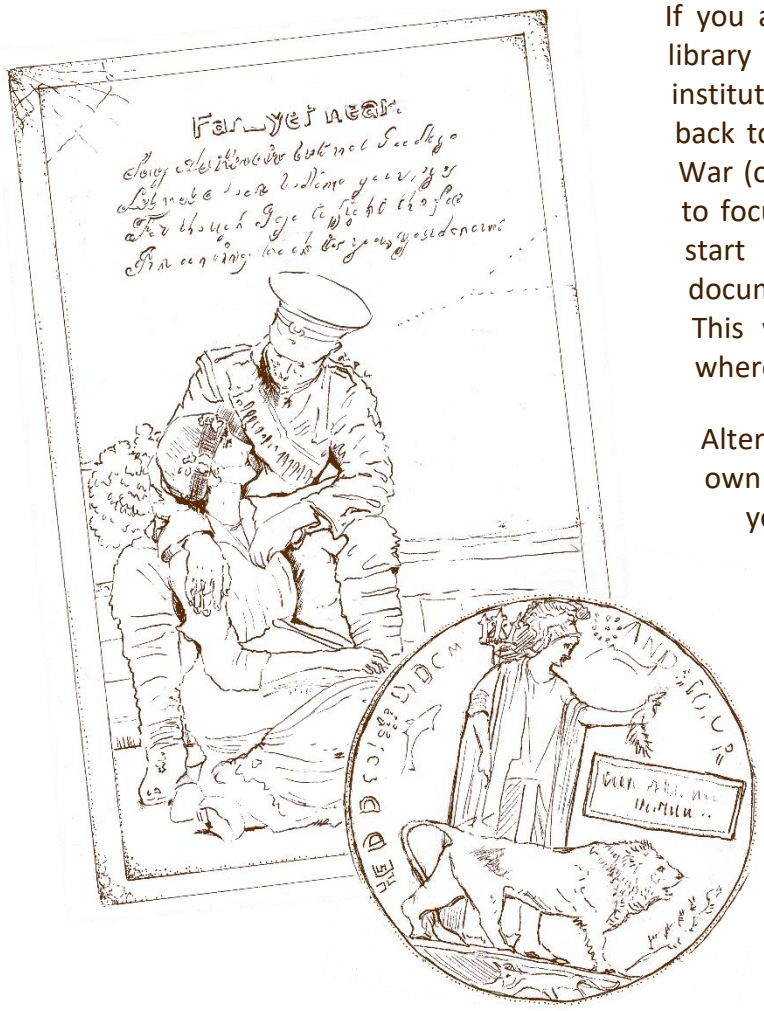
~ Finding Ephemera for your Workshop ~

To help you find suitable ephemera, you might want to check out our other project publication, Finding First World War Ephemera: A Field Guide by Ann-Marie Foster. The Field Guide gives you a concise introduction to where you can look for First World War-related ephemera.



If you are working in a museum or library context, or within an institution (like a school) that dates back to the time of the First World War (or whichever period you want to focus on), then it is a good idea start with small objects and documents in your own collections. This will give you a nice link to where the workshop is held.

Alternatively, you can dip into your own family archives, or those of your participants. One option is to encourage everyone to bring along one meaningful item – which works better if you don't have a specific theme or topic, but can work well even if you specify it has to be war-related in some way.

If you can't fall back on physical items, digitised ephemera are a useful alternative. Here are some quick pointers to where you can find digitised ephemera related to the war:

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

The Caribbean's Great War Virtual Exhibition –

☛ https://westindiacommittee.org/historyheritageculture/gallery/the-virtual-exhibition/

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

☛ https://www.jewsfww.uk/

Women and War Wales –

☛ http://www.womenandwar.wales/

There will almost certainly be projects more local to you that have compiled online collections of ephemera, and it's worth seeking these out, too.

Photographs, cartoons, adverts, news articles, images of postcards, posters, and other paper-based ephemera, can be printed on card, ideally in colour. This helps to replicate engagement with 'real' ephemera to a certain extent – with the advantage that you don't have to worry about fragile items being damaged, though obviously their fragility can be part of their creative appeal.

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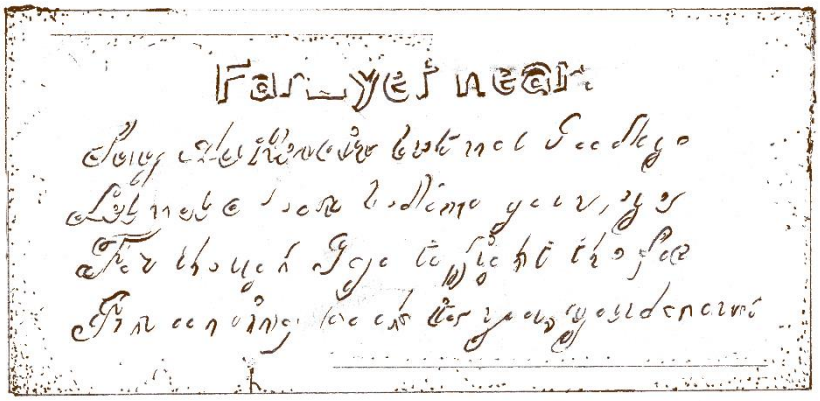

~ Getting started: Icebreaker questions ~

Whether you are working with a group who know each other well or those who are meeting for the first time, it's always good to ease ourselves into creative activities. Here are some questions you can ask participants to talk about in pairs or small groups, then report back – we have given a range of variations on the same themes to suit all ages and abilities, and different levels of familiarity.

- What are common things people keep in a shoebox to remember?
- What kinds of things do you keep that other people might get rid of?
- What is your favourite kind of ephemera?
- What kinds of small objects do we find in
  - A museum
  - An archive
  - Someone's attic?
  - What are the differences between them, if any?

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~ Ephemera and You ~

This is a more fundamental exercise, which can either be used to kick start the workshop (if participants already know one another and feel comfortable with each other), or as a reflective exercise at the end of a workshop, when participants have got to know each other a little and are more likely to feel comfortable sharing personal thoughts.

- What sort of object or image is meaningful in your life?
- What would you put in a time capsule to represent who you are?
- Try to choose something which is complicated – not just something you like or are passionate about, but something which you have mixed feeling about.
- The best choices are often the ones where you can't quite say why it's important.
- Describe your image/object, and try to explain why you have chosen it.

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~ Discussing examples of writing prompted by ephemera ~

A helpful way to begin any creative work is to look at an example. Here are some suggestions for short poems based on paper ephemera or small objects that work for an opening discussion, with questions you might use to guide discussion. Each of these uses ephemera in a different way: either describing an encounter with ephemera (Dyment's letter), using ephemera as a metaphor (Shahid Ali's postcard), or evoking the form of a flimsy paper record to convey additional meaning (Pagis's note written in pencil).

General questions to get you started that will work for all poems might be:

- Tell us one thing you noticed about the poem and found interesting.
- How does the poem make you feel?
- What descriptive language is used?

'The Son' (1937) by Clifford Dyment (1914 1971)

https://www.poetrybyheart.org.uk/poems/the-son

- How is the letter described? And what impression does that give you of its importance?
- Who might have kept the letter, and why?

'Postcard from Kashmir' by Agha Shahid Ali (1949 2001)

https://www.brinkerhoffpoetry.org/poems/postcard-from-kashmir

- What does the postcard stand in for in this poem? How is it described?
- Who is speaking, and why does the postcard have such an impact on them?
- What are the links between the postcard and the speaker's own memories?

'Written in Pencil in the Sealed Freightcar' (1970) by Dan Pagis (1930 1986)

https://www.futurelearn.com/info/courses/poetry-and-the-holocaust/0/steps/164893

- What kind of document does the poem invite us to imagine?
- How much does it rely on our knowledge of the Holocaust and deportation?
- How does the form the poem suggests add to its meaning – does it suggest things that the words themselves don't spell out for us?
- Who can we imagine 'finding' the note?

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~ Responding to a Visual Prompt ~

This is a staged exercise designed to help participants approach a visual prompt: a photograph, drawing, cartoon, picture postcard, embroidered image, painting, statue, or similar. We recommend giving out one prompt after the other, allowing between 5-15 minutes each. Don't overwhelm participants by giving them all the prompts at once. You can also be selective and/or tweak the prompts, depending what kind of image(s) you are using.

1. **Describe your image/item**. What does it show? Give as much detail as you can.
2. **Now zoom in on one part of the image**, preferably as small as possible (an object in the background, a word in the caption, a piece of clothing, a plant – anything goes). How did it come to be there? Who put it there? What can it tell us about the scene?
3. **Who** – if there are people in your image, pick one person in the image and describe/imagine them. Who are they? What are they doing there? What are they feeling or thinking about? Focus on the now – the moment the image was made.
4. **What's missing from the image?** Imagine something that's not shown that you think could be significant
5. **Now imagine before or after.** What events led up to the moment pictured, or the moment the image was created? Or what events came later? If there are people in the image, what's their story? What's this individual's story?
6. **Finally, step back and think about the image in later life.** Who finds it/holds it/looks at it? (Maybe it's you, but maybe it's someone else.) What does it mean to them? What's going on in their life at the time?

Now write a poem or story drawing on all this.

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~ Responding to an Object ~

This is a staged exercise designed to help participants approach a physical object: a uniform button, badge, medal, brooch, notebook, picture frame, or similar. We recommend giving out one prompt after the other, allowing between 5-15 minutes each. Don't overwhelm participants by giving them all the prompts at once. You can also be selective and/or tweak the prompts, depending what kind of image(s) you are using.

1. **Describe your object.** What does it look like, feel like, perhaps smell like? Give as much detail as you can.
2. **Now zoom in on one part of the object,** preferably as small as possible (a small crack, an intricate detail of the design). Describe it in detail – what makes it noticeable? How did you first notice it?
3. **Who made or owned this object?** Focus on the now – the moment the object was newly made, newly purchased, or newly received as a gift.
4. **What could be missing?** Imagine something that hasn't survived that you think could be significant – packaging, an accompanying booklet of instructions, a companion piece, or similar.
5. **Now think about where the object has** been between its first being made or purchased or gifted, and now. Imagine some of the places it has been, and how long for.
6. **Finally, step back and think about the object in later life.** Who finds it/holds it/looks at it? (Maybe it's you, but maybe it's someone else.) What does it mean to them? What's going on in their life at the time?

Now write a poem or story drawing on all this.

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~ Researching and writing about a (digitised) object from a museum ~

This exercise is a longer-form one specifically to explore ephemera and objects held in a museum. It requires a little more time – either a longer workshop, or two sessions with some time in between for participants to go away and do their research. It also requires access to the internet, regardless of whether a digital or physical object is used.

The starting point is picking an object that is not entirely obvious and offers an unusual angle on a familiar topic. It should have some documentation attached to it, but not be fully explained or glossed, so as to leave room for the imagination.

Carved wooden box used for our trial exercise. Image: © IWM (EPH 543)

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For our trial run of this exercise, we used this object from the Imperial War Museums' digitised collections, which is a carved wooden box: a souvenir brought back to England from Russia by a British prisoner of war, an item we (correctly) anticipated would be unfamiliar or surprising to most people.

In the opening briefing, show participants the object and give them a brief chance to look at the basic information available.

In the case of our wooden box from Imperial War Museums, we were able to show several images, including of the inside of the box and the notebook it contains, and participants were able to read the catalogue description: 'Rounded rectangular wooden box with a hinged [lid] that has become detached. The lid is decorated with a plant bearing four large flowers and features the inscriptions "J.B.W.", "МОСКВА Бутырская тюрьма" (Moscow Butirskaya Prison) and "11/IX 1919". The inside of the lid bears seventeen signatures.'

After giving participants time to look at the digital images and information, set some time aside for group discussion. Talk about the following:

- **What kind of object is it?** What do we know?
- **What don't we know** but might want to know about the object?
- Do you have any ideas **what the object might have been used for**?
- **Why do we think this object was donated to the museum**, and by whom?

Following this introductory discussion, give participants time to research the object further and develop ideas around it. The following prompts will help

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Prompt 1: Background research

From the information you have, can you find out more about the context of the object? Depending on what you already know, research things such as:

- **The place** the item was created, found, or donated from
- **The person(s)** who made/bought and/or donated the object
- **The year** it was created, found or donated
- **Any event(s)** linked to the object
- **Any material(s)** used in producing the object
- **Any people, places or organisations** referenced in the item or its description

Prompt 2: Filling in the gaps

Now you know a little more about the context of your object, think about the following:

- **Write a basic description of the object in your own words.** This can be fully written out, or just a list of words or bullet points.
- **Choose one piece of information you did manage to find** relating to the object that really intrigues you, and make notes about how it makes you feel about the object, and/or why you find it interesting.
- **Pick a gap in your knowledge** – something you weren't able to find out anything about. Speculate about it! Write down as many possible explanations as you can think of.

Prompt 3: Writing your response

Finally, it's time to choose your creative approach to the object. Using the notes you've made and the things you've found out, pick one of the following:

1. **Imagine you are a museum guide introducing the object to a group of visitors.** Think about who the visitors are – school children? Teenagers? Students? Families? Elderly visitors? Tourists from abroad? Once you have an audience in mind, write up what you would tell them about the object as a short monologue. Perhaps your visitors also ask questions – your monologue can respond to those imaginary questions, too!
2. **Imagine you or somebody else finds this object for the first time.** If it's you, where and how do you come across it? What is your immediate response to it? Write a poem or short sketch about this. If you imagine somebody else finding it, think about who they are and how/why they might have come across the object. Either way, think about the emotions and thoughts prompted by finding the object.

Of course, you can also allow other forms of responding to the object, which could include writing a speculative label for exhibiting the item, a story that includes the item, song lyrics, or similar. Your participants' age and level of writing experience can be your guide.

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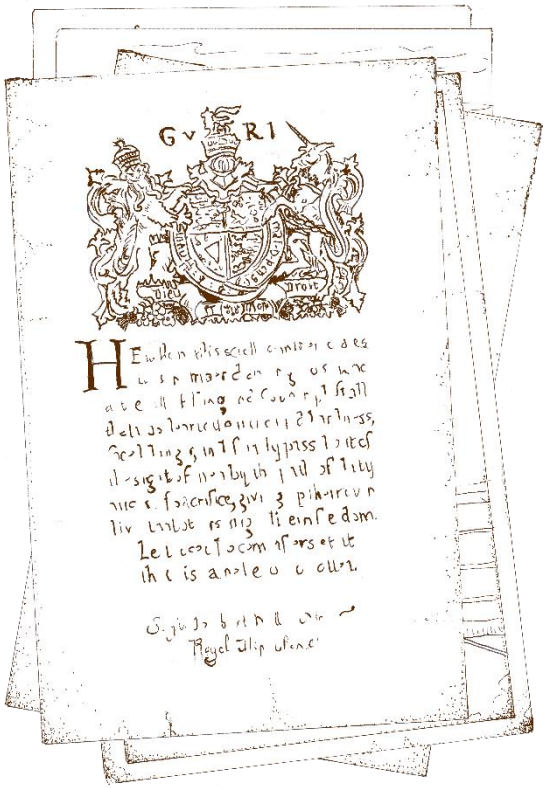
~ Closing Thoughts ~

In our project workshops, we saw just how rich and varied creative responses to objects can be. Beyond producing thoughtful and interesting writing, our participants engaged in brilliant discussions with each other – not just about the ephemera we'd chosen, but also about the many ways in which they connected to their own lives and experiences. This ranged from reminiscing about family history to thinking about the absence or loss of our own ephemera, and how – and why – we might re-image what is no longer there.



Though this toolkit was created with writing as the creative method in mind, there is no reason why you can't adapt the basic ideas to allow for other forms of creative expression: drawing, painting, fibre crafts, but also sound recordings, podcasts, music or short videos could offer fantastic ways for participants to respond to ephemera from a troubled past. The important thing is to engage with the documents and objects and to think about their resonance into our presence. The medium in which we do this is entirely secondary.

The reason why ephemera open up a unique chance to connect lies in their very nature, which combines fragility and everydayness: ephemera are the kind of stuff that endures against the odds, and recalls the hands that have handled these objects and documents over time. Every piece of ephemera has layers of possible meaning, some preserved in family stories or in writing, and many others lost to time – just waiting for us to imagine.

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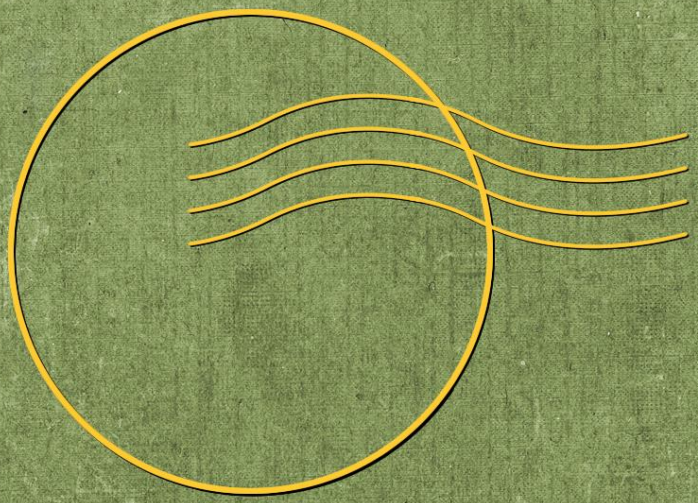

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