

Impact case study (REF3)

Institution: University of Bristol		
Unit of Assessment: 22) Anthropology and Development Studies		
Title of case study: Trench art: Changing museum practice, inspiring creative production, and increasing public engagement during the First World War centenary		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2007-2017		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Nicholas J Saunders	Professor of Material Culture	01/09/2007-31/07/2017
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 1 August 2013-31 December 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		

1. Summary of the impact

Through an innovative focus on conflict-related objects, including art works made by soldiers in the trenches of the First World War, Professor Saunders has transformed how the material culture of conflict is perceived, valued and exhibited, leading to global impacts. During this REF period, Saunders has collaborated with museums in the UK, Belgium and Australia to uncover and present their collections of such hitherto neglected objects, revealing their value for understanding the experiences of those in the trenches. His research shaped an exhibition in Australia, which reached over 32,000 visitors, and inspired many more exhibitions in Europe during the WWI centenary. In doing so, it increased public engagement with conflict history, as well as participation in WWI heritage research, in turn enabling people to reconnect with their own family history through collections handed down across generations. His work has also inspired the production of two new plays and an opera.

2. Underpinning research**Trench Art: material memories of modern conflict**

Between 2007 and 2017, Professor Saunders' interdisciplinary research focussed on locating, describing, and analysing a hitherto unacknowledged and un-investigated kind of First World War material culture called 'trench art', i.e. memory objects and souvenirs made by soldiers, prisoners of war, and civilians alike between 1914 and 1939. These tell multifaceted human stories of struggle, emotion, loss, identity, and survival, but had been elided since the 1920s by the dominant narrative of military history. The biographies of these emotion-laden memory objects were interpreted afresh and extended in geographical and chronological scope, in archive and fieldwork research, museum exhibitions, publications (in UK and Europe), and media presentations which analysed and presented them as 'contested objects' with global reach, including the discovery, documentation and exhibition of a hitherto unknown corpus made by Chinese labourers (1917-1923) [3.4]. Underpinning this research was an innovative methodological approach to First World War and other material culture developed by Saunders. This included participant observation (with 'object' as reference point where possible) at exhibitions, militaria events, interviews with collectors, museum curators, battlefield tourists, and correspondence worldwide with individuals who offered their own family stories in response to Saunders's general-public publications. Saunders's approach was groundbreaking as its focus was on the social-cultural role of these objects in the family home and for family histories – foregrounding testimony and memory in his methodology – and so marking a significant shift away from forensic analyses of military history and the service records of interviewees' families.

Anthropological archaeology of modern conflict

It became increasingly clear from 2007 onwards that trench art was a powerful stepping-stone to a wider 'concept' of conflict-related objects and landscapes. As such, it was in part refashioned as a new analytical tool to investigate similar objects from all 20th/21st century conflicts within a nascent archaeology of modern conflict, informing excavations and interpretations within an interdisciplinary context shaped by material culture anthropology. The trench art project became a leading activity in the formulation of an 'anthropological-archaeology of modern conflict'. This

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too was published in journal articles, a monograph [3.1, 3.2, 3.6], several museum exhibitions (and catalogues), and disseminated through national and international public and academic talks. Building on this, Saunders initiated further interdisciplinary fieldwork projects, including a 10-year investigation (2005-2014) of the 1916-18 Arab Revolt in southern Jordan, with al-Hussein bin Talal University, known as the Great Arab Revolt Project (GARP) [3.3, 3.5]. Here Saunders brought a theoretically nuanced interdisciplinary perspective to what otherwise would have been a straightforward archaeology project (i.e. surveying and digging). His approach cast the net far wider to include issues of memory and landscape, material culture, local community oral history/family biographies and visits by schoolchildren, interaction with Bedouin using local knowledge and historical photographs to locate historical sites (after 100 years), local and national museum co-operation, exploration of re-use of prehistoric sites by First World War protagonists, and exploration of 20thC media presentations of the Arab Revolt landscape, notably in David Lean's Hollywood epic *Lawrence of Arabia*.

First World War public commemorations

This approach was extended to investigate the role and significance of conflict material culture in public commemoration of (and public participation in investigating) the First World War Centenary in the UK. This led to Saunders and J Schofield undertaking an English Heritage-funded one-year project *The Home Front (1914-1918) and its Legacies: A Pilot Project* in 2012-13 [3.7]. The success of this led directly to the four-year Council for British Archaeology 'Homefront Legacy' project where the public were trained and actively engaged in recording the material remains of the First World War using Saunders' methodology.

3. References to the research

- 3.1 **Saunders NJ** (2010), *'Killing Time': Archaeology and the First World War*, rev. ed., Cheltenham: The History Press [Available on request]
- 3.2 **Saunders NJ** and Cornish P (eds) (2009), *Contested Objects: Material Memories of the Great War*, Abingdon: Routledge [Available on request]
- 3.3 **Saunders NJ** and Faulkner N (2009). War without frontiers: The archaeology of the Great Arab Revolt, in Peacock B (ed.), *The Frontiers of the Ottoman World*, pp.431-451, Proceedings of the British Academy 156. Oxford: Oxford University Press [Available on request]
- 3.4 **Saunders NJ** (2012). Travail et nostalgie sur le front de l'Ouest: l'Art des tranchées chinoises et la Première Guerre mondiale (Labour and Longing on the Western Front: Chinese material culture and the First World War), in Li Ma L (ed.), *Chinese Workers in the First World War/ Les Travailleurs Chinois dans La Première Guerre Mondiale*, pp.435-451, Paris: CNRS [Available on request]
- 3.5 **Saunders NJ** and Faulkner N (2014). Excavating a Legend: Lawrence of Arabia's Desert Campsite at Tooth Hill, *Current World Archaeology*, **66**, pp.30-35
https://www.academia.edu/9988189/Excavating_a_legend_Lawrence_of_Arabias_Desert_Campsite_at_Tooth_Hill
- 3.6 **Saunders NJ** and Paul Cornish (eds) (2017), *Modern Conflict and the Senses: Killer Instincts?*, London: Routledge [Available on request]

Funding information

- 3.7 **Saunders NJ** (PI), Schofield J and Glass E (CIs), *The Home Front (1914-1918) and its Legacies: A Pilot Study for a national public archaeology recording project of First World War Legacies in Britain*, English Heritage, 2014-2018, GBP39,331

4. Details of the impact

Saunders' research has had a profound impact on museums, creative practitioners, and members of the public through transforming how previously neglected conflict-related objects and artworks are perceived and valued.

From storage to display: Changing museum practice and preservation of cultural heritage

Prior to his research, UK and international museums showed no interest in displaying conflict-related objects and trench art, regarding them as possessing little or no public interest. Despite

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their significance during and after the First World War for soldiers and civilians, this significance was obscured through the ‘forgetting’ of objects which possessed intense emotional resonance for many families. Saunders’ research methodology changed museum practice in relation to curating conflict, from a traditional approach focused on historical facts and literary memory, to one incorporating empathy, family experiences, and the multidimensional (and often volatile) biographies of these objects. His research led to a radical shift in understanding the cultural phenomenon of trench art and opened a new space for understanding and engaging with conflict and material culture. He demonstrated trench art’s social and cultural dimensions and, through the collaborations described below, inspired museum professionals across the world to interpret, conserve, and display these objects in public exhibitions.

Imperial War Museum

Following a long-standing collaboration with the Imperial War Museum (IWM), Saunders helped curators understand and interpret their own trench art collections and embed a new approach to material culture. He helped introduce them to a new interdisciplinary methodology; to be more curious and uncover the stories behind their objects and not to rely on typology. It is this approach that helped inform the restructure of their curatorial teams in 2016. IWM’s Assistant Director of Narrative and Content states ‘I can’t think of anybody before [Saunders] who had quite as much influence on what we are doing. ... [Saunders] helped us to look at our collections differently the whole discipline of material culture has really made a mark on the way that we explore and investigate our collections. ... [Saunders] has added value to our collection by giving objects much greater impact’ [5.1]. Saunders’ approach to material culture led IWM to reimagine how they exhibited objects. The Senior Curator at IWM noted ‘Using the material culture approach towards our exhibitions has given us more freedom to communicate objects and experience in exhibitions ... having this academic perspective has elevated the value of those collections and public perceptions of our contents by doing so’ [5.1]. IWM’s Assistant Director of Narrative and Content described Saunders as a ‘pioneer’ in shaping the way IWM collaborated with academics. IWM have since launched the IWM Institute in 2018 and have subsequently collaborated with numerous academics [5.1].

Art Gallery of South Australia

Saunders collaborated with the Art Gallery of South Australia (AGSA), Adelaide, to launch ‘*Sappers and Shrapnel: Contemporary Art and the Art of the Trenches*’ exhibition (11 November 2016 – 29 January 2017). The exhibition comprised 187 artworks and included trench art from the Australian War Memorial collection. The curator said, ‘Nick made an enormous contribution ... [and] the myriad visitors had the epiphany of recognition when they viewed the objects - motivating them to ‘dig out’ their own collections’. ‘The exhibition was seen by national and local visitors, school children and educators, veterans and current service men and women’ [5.2]. The exhibition attracted 32,534 visitors, representing an average of 382 visitors per day, including 2,350 students and educators [5.3]. The AGSA offered a range of events and programming free of charge for those looking for a deeper understanding of the exhibition. In total, 23 events programmed around the exhibition attracted 6,049 attendees. The exhibition generated a significant online reach with 119,000 impressions on Twitter and 3,300 followers; Facebook reached over 23,000 likes; and Instagram reached 17,400 people. The editorial value of media coverage was in excess of AUD3.5 million. During the exhibition, 342 copies of the *Sappers & Shrapnel* exhibition publication were sold; 62 publications were sold as part of a Gallery membership drive; and a further 150 were ordered by Thames and Hudson to distribute nationally and into New Zealand [5.3].

Inspired by the success of the exhibition, AGSA later acquired several pieces of trench art that enriched their subsequent war-themed displays (particularly those held on ANZAC Day). Furthermore, Saunders connected the museum’s Assistant Director to new collectors, some of whom have since gifted to the collection, and to new audiences for art [5.2].

In Flanders Fields Museum, Ypres, Belgium

Saunders’ collaborated with In Flanders Fields Museum (IFFM), Belgium, to embed a deeper understanding of trench art and IFFM have since rooted trench art into all their exhibitions. Saunders brokered relationships between private collectors and the museum. A Senior

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Researcher at IFFM states ‘if it wasn’t for [Saunders], I don’t think we could have established such excellent ties with so many private collectors and have been able to use these guys, not only for obtaining exhibits for loan, but also learning from them and working with them’ [5.4]. One such example came in January 2019, when Saunders facilitated the donation of 27 shell casings engraved by Chinese soldiers during the First World War to IFFM. As a result, the museum has the largest collection in the world of Chinese trench art from the First World War. These shell casings were the focal point of IFFM exhibition *Dragons on the Western Front*, launched in July 2019 (ongoing). The museum anticipates this exhibition will increase their reach with Chinese tourists (data unknown due to Covid-19) [5.4].

Newark Museum

Artefacts excavated during Saunders’ Great Arab Revolt Project (GARP) [3.5] were the inspiration for the UK’s first exhibition on Lawrence of Arabia *Shifting Sands: Lawrence of Arabia and the Great Arab Revolt* at the National Civil War Centre, Newark Museum. Launched in October 2016, the exhibition was originally planned to run for six months but due to overwhelming public interest was extended to March 2018. Saunders also helped the museum to secure additional objects for the exhibition, including an elaborate bronze name plate from one of the Hejaz Railway trains belonging to Lawrence himself. These incredibly rare name plates were taken as souvenirs of British-Arab blowing up of Turkish trains. Newark Museum’s curator states that the ‘reach of the museum increased because of the *Shifting Sands* exhibition’ [5.5]. During the 18-month period a total of 3,106 people visited, generating tickets sales over GBP16,000. One visitor described it as the ‘best temporary exhibition yet’ [5.5]. The success of the exhibition led members of the public to uncover their own artefacts. One woman found a silver-gilt dagger gifted to her grandfather by Lawrence. These objects were donated to the museum and later became part of the exhibition itself [5.5].

Other museum collaborations

During the centenary, many UK regional and regimental museums included trench art displays (physical and online), which were directly or indirectly influenced by Saunders’ research. These included the Museum of Freemasonry London’s *English Freemasonry and the First World War* exhibition, 15 September 2014 - 15 May 2015. The Curator states that ‘a lot of the work we did with [Saunders] was revisited for an exhibition on Freemasonry in the First World War... the materiality of it and the Trench Art aspect and generally the material culture side of the war, it was much more comprehensively covered and if we had not maintained contact with [Saunders] then it would have been very different.’ [5.10].

Increasing public participation and interest in commemoration of the First World War centenary

In the lead up to the First World War centenary, Saunders’ led an English Heritage pilot project [3.7], which aimed to engage members of the public in their local heritage environment in two regions of England. The project trained volunteers of all ages to record data from local heritage sites and archaeological traces of the First World War. This methodology of community participation in Saunders’ pilot led to the commissioning of a four-year Council for British Archaeology (CBA) *Homefront Legacy* project, where the public were trained and actively engaged in recording the physical remains of the First World War. Since its launch in 2014, 5,660 sites across the UK have been recorded by volunteers, many of which were significant new additions to the archaeological record. Furthermore, Saunders’ pilot project resulted in the modification of, or creation of, new categories included in the National Heritage List (NHL) of heritage assets in England to reflect how places, spaces and buildings were constructed, used or affected by the First World War [5.7]. An archaeologist at Historic England explained that Saunders’ pilot project also contributed towards the CBA Archaeological Handbook of the First World War [5.6].

Volunteers involved in the pilot project were inspired to continue volunteering in future projects using the skills gained. One volunteer described the project as giving her the skills and confidence to volunteer on the ‘Battle of Barnet’ project and ‘Eighth in the East’, a project in late 2013 recording the arrival, effect and sites used by the American Air Force in WW2.

Inspiring the production of new creative performances

Jan Woolf was a writer in residence on Saunders' Great Arab Revolt Project, taking part in a dig in Jordan in 2013. She began writing a new play about TE Lawrence while helping to excavate bits of wrecked railway, soldiers' buttons, cartridges, and bullets. 'I literally dug a play out of the desert, turning the detritus of war and human devastation into dialogue', she said. Through conversations with Saunders she gained inspiration to produce her play *The Man with the Gold*, which was launched at the Cockpit Theatre, London, in January 2016 and was funded by the TE Lawrence Society. Three further readings took place at St John's College, Oxford (September 2016), Newark Civil War Museum (January 2017), and Christ's Hospital School (November 2019) with a total audience of over 200 people. A full-length centenary play was scheduled for October 2020. 'The play is terrific: witty, unusual, and timely and it's going to be very watchable' described one reviewer [5.8]. Woolf explains that Saunders gave her work 'intellectual credibility' and her experiences on Saunders' project gave her the confidence to become a writer in residence on another trip in Rishikesh in India two years later, where she wrote *The Dog Barked in India* which was published in India. She credits Saunders with making her a better playwright and has subsequently been inspired to write two further plays [5.8].

Saunders' research on Chinese trench art [3.4] led to a relationship with the UK's Chinese community, and inspired actor and theatre director Daniel York Loh's play on the Chinese Labour Corps, *Forgotten*. The play is about the little-known story of the 140,000 Chinese Labour Corps who left everything and travelled halfway around the world to work for Britain and its Allies behind the front lines during the First World War. Loh's play described as a 'research-based' drama, was shown at Plymouth Theatre Royal (17-20 October 2018) and Arcola Theatre London (23 October - 17 November 2018), as well as being made available online. Loh said 'Nick's work did have an influence, because I listened to his talks and for me it made a massive difference ... I felt empowered and confident enough to go and write the story'. As a Chinese descendent, Loh described seeing Chinese people in the audience as 'extraordinary' [5.8].

Saunders' research on trench art flower designs led to his public-oriented book, "The Poppy: A Cultural History from Ancient Egypt to Flanders Fields to Afghanistan" (2014) tracing the flower's cultural and social history. This provided composer Cheryl Frances-Hoad and librettist Tamsin Collison with a framework for the narrative for *Last Man Standing*, a BBC Radio 3 commissioned 28-minute work for baritone and orchestra to commemorate the Armistice, which was premiered at the Barbican by Marcus Farnsworth and the BBC Symphony Orchestra conducted by Martyn Brabbins in November 2018. The librettist said 'I read it cover-to-cover on New Year's Day, making copious notes. I could not put it down – it was a fascinating and inspiring read. I suggested we turn our song cycle into a Biography of the Poppy...' [5.9].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

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- 5.1 Imperial War Museum – Interview transcripts (July 2019), Assistant Director of Narrative and Content; Curator
 - 5.2 Art Gallery of South Australia – Interview transcript (August 2019), Assistant Director
 - 5.3 *Sappers and Shrapnel* Exhibition Report
 - 5.4 In Flanders Fields Museum – Interview transcript (July 2019), Senior Researcher
 - 5.5 Newark Museum – Interview transcript (August 2019), Curator; Visitor reviews (2016-2017)
 - 5.6 Historic England – Interview transcript (July 2019), Archaeologist
 - 5.7 *The Home Front and its Legacies* Final Report (March 2014)
 - 5.8 Playwright Jan Woolf – Interview transcript (July 2019), and [website extract](#) [Accessed 30/10/2020]; Playwright Daniel York Loh – Interview transcript (July 2019)
 - 5.9 'Last Man Standing' by Cheryl Frances-Hoad and Tamsin Collison – Programme note and reviews (2018)
 - 5.10 Freemasons Museum – Interview transcript (August 2019), Curator