Audio file

2023-06-17-enfac-tfh-ep8-TheLinenHallBelfastCollectionDay.mp3

Transcript

INTRO

Joseph Quinn

We're here in the linen hall on Saturday 17th of June 2023, and we're just after finishing up the first Northern Ireland event run by Their Finest Hour. And I'm here with Scott Edgar, who was the Chief Event Coordinator of the Their Finest Hour event here in the Linen Hall.

And, Scott, how do you think today went?

Scott Edgar

Based on the feedback that we've had from our staff our volunteers, the people who attended, people who brought objects, photos and stories into us, everyone left here with a great sense of fulfilment, really, and a great enjoyment of the day. The vast range of people in, from a 93-year-old gentleman who remembered the war himself down to a family who brought their two small kids in, and it was the first time that they had heard their grandfather's story. So, it was a real mix of people and just everyone left with smiles on their faces and we're very, very pleased to be a part of it.

Joseph

Yeah, there seemed to be a really, really great atmosphere. I mean, how many volunteers were working, because people were coming and going. There was a very well-ordered system where people got breaks, people relieved other people at various different stations. How many did we have in total? I almost lost count.

Scott

We had 10 - 10 volunteers in total. Some were staff here from the Linen Hall somewhere, or regular volunteers. All very knowledgeable, all on top of their game today. We were privileged here to have people who work within our Collections Team who are well used to handling archival documents, who are used to taking scans and digital photos, so they were in their element and, you know, quite a lot of them were really pleased to be part of this project. And you know, it's another string to their bow and something to put on the CV, even if you know, like me, you're getting on a bit and probably won't be passing your CV around as much.

But, yeah, it was a great experience for all of the volunteers and all the team.

Joseph

Did you have any comments from any of the participants who came today? I mean, I did note that some of the participants who were here today were particularly sort of enthused about the interest. One particular guest, a lady called Dorothy who I interviewed at the end, one of the things she commented on was basically that she was surprised that anybody would take any interest at all in

what she had - the stories she had to tell - and the treasure trove of material that she brought in. She was struck by the amount of significance that we attached to this material, which she didn't - she felt it might have been personally significant, but the wider context of it… What, in your experience, what did you… Did you get any comments or feedback from anyone?

Scott

Yeah, that was an overwhelming feeling from the whole day. In fact, long before the day even started, you know, for the last week - days and weeks I've been receiving emails from people and they've all been along the lines of I don't really have much. I don't have much of a story. I have a grandfather or a great uncle who served here - there? But you know all I have - so everyone just looks at their own little family story - I'm guilty of the unit as well with my grandfather service - is like all I know or all I have is this little thing. We had one person who emailed me and, "I don't really have anything to bring. Oh, apart from a letter from the King!" So, you know people just casually drop these things in the conversation and they think they're of no interest, you know, to anything. But I saw a lot of the material coming in today. Some of it was just incredible. We had everything from personal diaries, letters - we had two fantastic uniforms brought in and that's just what I know about. You know, if this wasn't just an audio recording, people could see my desk, which is stacked high with paperwork and digital recording equipment. And I just - I can't wait to start going through it and see what our volunteers collected on the day.

Joseph

One of the things just, sort of, for people's knowledge or - essentially of where we are and just to provide a little bit of background context. So, the Linen Hall is situated right in the heart of Belfast. You could probably hear a lot of noise in the background. Things been dragged on the street - a little bit of pop music here and there. So, we're in a lively, bustling city centre in central Belfast. So life is going on all around this building and people are coming and going.

And just today, just today, we were focusing on Northern Ireland in the Second World War. That was really the chief topic or underlying theme. How well do you think the stories that we got today kind of connected with this theme or sort of brought to life, in a sense, the role that this part of Ireland played in the United Kingdom war effort than the British and Allied war effort?

Scott

I think, certainly based on what I've heard, it really covered what for me is the story of Northern Ireland during the Second World War, which is a story of complexity and nuance, and it's social history, it's political history, it's religion, it's everything! And there - it's not just, you know, as people like to say, chaps on maps, it wasn't just a day of military history. It wasn't just a day of, 'here is a service record, and here are some medals', which is, you know, great stuff in itself. But we covered some, some quite weighty topics today as well as, you know, as well as talking about, you know, the influences of Polish people coming here, of American people coming here, and we had a uniform of an American Red Cross nurse - someone who worked on an airfield in Kilkeel, you know, in one of the American bases. So, it wasn't just about Northern Ireland, but it was very much based in Northern Ireland. It was the story of Northern Ireland during the Second World War.

Joseph

Hmm. And the people who came and went and, I mean actually, tying in with this, actually, is the story of the very first person who showed up today, Paul Robinson. And Paul Robinson came in. He has a Northern Irish, a local accent, and for all intents and purposes he seems like somebody who is -

you know, he's born and bred in Northern Ireland in the Belfast area. He's been here all of his life. And you think that this is where he's from. This is where he originates from. And immediately you're wondering what community is he from? Is this, that, whatever? Well, Paul's story was probably the most nuanced story that came before us today, and all everybody's personal story you find, when it comes to Northern Ireland, is nuanced. It's not as black and white as what people might assume.

And Paul's story is that his father was a Welsh soldier who came here in 1940, with the Welsh and Midland Division, was stationed in Northern Ireland prior to being deployed elsewhere. And while he was in Northern Ireland, he met Paul's mother in a pub, because Paul's mother was from Newry and that's where they were stationed. And when he was based down there, he had a random encounter with her in a pub while having a drink with a mate. And, they got married in Northern Ireland and, essentially, he ended up coming back to Northern Ireland because of a guilt that he felt about - I go into some detail in the interview with Paul on this and people will hear it. But the thing is that his father was embedded within the Northern Ireland Nationalist community in the Stranmillis area, while, at the same time, maintaining a connection with the military authorities, the British military authorities in Northern Ireland during the Troubles. And acting - he was acting as a go between, a well-placed go between, between the Nationalist community in this part of Northern Ireland and the military authorities during the worst period of the Troubles. Going in and out of prisons, essentially, on behalf of families who had prisoners in them, you know, who had loved ones who were prisoners in the Maze, were political prisoners. And, at the same time, acting sort of as a messenger, basically, by the Army headquarters in Northern Ireland.

It's just absolutely extraordinary and this is all because of the fact that he came to Northern Ireland as a Welsh soldier stationed overseas and chose to live in Northern Ireland after the war and just ended up playing this role, and was accepted within the Nationalist community even though he was an ex-British soldier.

Scott

I think it's an incredible story, that one in particular, but on top of the kind of brilliance of that story and the fact that Paul trusted us with it and came in and shared with us, I think that, for me, represents the power and the importance of Their Finest Hour because that is a story that would have been lost or confined to - I'm not even sure if it's written down anywhere until today. If it was written down anywhere or if it all just existed as an oral history within the family, but events like this bring not only these stories to the fore, but you can see how stories that come from Northern Ireland are going to be radically different from stories that you get in the South East of England or in Scotland or in Wales, or you know where, wherever they come from across the United Kingdom. And every region, every area will have its own nuances, its own, you know, its own connections to the Second World War and what I found today is that we also got pre-war history tying in, we got post-war history, you know you're talking there about the Troubles. But all of these things - there's just tentacles kind of coming out of Second World War history that touch all these other aspects of pre-war post-war history. What we're doing in contemporary times, what we're doing today. Places we go today. You know, it's all still - it's all still very relevant and, yeah, it's just it's nice for people to have events like this to come to and feel like their story is part of something much larger, yes.

Joseph

I totally agree and, actually, just sort of as you're saying that the value of Their finest Hour - at the same time, Their finest Hour only works if we have the support of venues such as the Linen Hall and, in particular, venues that are very well placed, as I feel the Linen hall was, to deliver on a key

objective which we had with the project all along. Because the thing about it is that in Northern Ireland there was a sectarian divide during the Second World War, as there would be after the war, and as there still is to a great extent today. And that sectarian divide influenced the way Northern Ireland rendered its war effort and how it conducted its role in the war - it very much did influence that. And as a result of the legacy of the Troubles and of, you know, the current Peace Process, it's rather difficult in a way to actually be able to reach in to the heritage of a minority when it connects with the Second World War, because to a certain extent that heritage was cast away. A tradition of service in the British Armed Forces also kind of came to an end within many families, within the nationalist part of Northern Ireland, and so it would almost seem that it's a one-sided war effort - that it's rendered predominantly from the Loyalist, Protestant, pro-British section of the community - of Northern Ireland's population. But that's not actually the case at all.

And the utility, I suppose, of having an event like this in the Linen Hall is the Linen Hall's ability to appeal to people from all sides. That's what I understand. It's this safe space, this neutral space where people from both communities come to share their cultural experiences, their historical experiences. It has served, and continues to serve this role.

Scott

I mean the Linen Hall, for those who don't know, was founded in 1788 by townspeople of Belfast as a radical group of kind of forward-thinking people who wanted to share and disseminate knowledge with the working class to educate, to teach them to read, to collect great works on their behalf, to share with the town. And I feel we still hold that role. And we have, for example, we have a large political collection in here, and people who have been around the library longer than I have will tell you that if you went back to the 1990s, and this still happens today, but it's of less shock today – that in the 1990s, you would have gone up to one of the reading rooms and you would have leading members of the DUP and leading members of Sinn Fein sitting at tables side by side, going through archives, reading the papers. You know, one would obviously be reading the Belfast Telegraph and the other reading the Irish News, but they're in the same building, they're in the same space, they're sharing an archive.

And, you know, that's still something that continues today and it is a safe space. It's somewhere where members of the Protestant Unionist Loyalist community can come in and their stories are valued and shared and archived, and it's exactly the same for members of the nationalist Catholic community as well. And yeah, we fill that role, you know, right in the city centre, right in the heart of the city. You walk out the front door here you're at City Hall. If people have looked up Second World War footage of Belfast online, you will see the great and the good at Belfast City Hall. You'll see Eisenhower there, you'll see Montgomery there, you'll know - I think that the Deputy Prime Minister of Czechoslovakia, Jan Masaryk, visited Belfast at City Hall, so it's been - we're right in a very formative - not formative isn't the right word, but an important vital part of the city and a place where people came. You can look out the front door here and gaze over at monuments to the American Service personnel and one to James Mcgennis who was the only Victoria Cross winner from Northern Ireland and…

Joseph

…from Northern Ireland during the Second World War.

Scott

…was a Catholic from West Belfast.

Joseph

I was just going to say this because actually this is when you talk about all the big wartime events that occurred - and obviously this would have happened after the war - this is part of the whole post-war from 45 to 46. Sort of a post war bringing, bringing the troops, and in this case, the sailors, home from the war and sort of essentially tying off loose ends. And one of the loose ends that had to be tied off in - a very difficult loose end, I think to tie off for the Northern Ireland establishment - was pinning a Victoria Cross, or essentially – sorry, no, it wasn't pinning a Victoria Cross, but, I suppose donning garlands on Northern Ireland's sole Victoria Cross winner who was from nationalist West Belfast, and who received his Victoria Cross for an act of extraordinary bravery where he was responsible - his actions led to the sinking of a Japanese cruiser in Singapore Harbour, where he planted limpet mines on the hull of that cruiser. So he's - you see him in this photograph and there's a huge crowd and his family are there, and he's there in his Navy uniform, smartly dressed, being presented with, was he presented the Freedom of the City by Basil Brooke, the Prime Minister?

Scott

There - there was some controversy about the awarding of Freedom of the City, I believe, and I'm not - I'm not going to commit this to audio because I would need to go and research this…

Joseph

There is, there is.

Scott

…but I do recall there being certainly discussions among the Belfast Corporation, the forerunner of the Council here, about the awarding the Freedom of the City.

Joseph

Yeah. I don't think he got it, actually, yeah.

Scott

And I don't - I don't believe he got it, although he probably should. And it was many, many years after receiving the Victoria Cross that the monument was erected at City Hall to commemorate that. You know, I just think the Northern Ireland we're living in now is a - not a completely different place. There's still some tensions, there are still issues that need to be resolved, but we're in a much more comfortable place where people can come in and talk about their Second World War heroes and their family, who were from nationalist backgrounds, you know.

I come from a Protestant background. I'm not religious in any way, but that was my upbringing and I feel perfectly comfortable walking around Catholic cemeteries looking for, Commonwealth War Graves headstones, you know. And even the fact that they, you know, are in Catholic cemeteries is something that maybe 20 years ago I wouldn't necessarily have even considered, but I think we've come a long way in places like Linen Hall and projects like Their Finest Hour only help that process, because we do have people like Paul who come in this morning and shared that wonderful story. And it validates - it makes it OK for other people to come forward and say, 'I come from that background, and here's my story.'

Joseph

Yeah, I totally agree with you. And I suppose for listeners to this podcast, you know, they're probably - their heads are probably spinning with, I suppose, the layers of complexity that are going on in this particular region of the UK, but not that they probably weren't aware of it already. But in terms of how complex - sort of talking about, even the war effort, Northern Ireland's war effort, that it comes loaded with all these nuances. There's no conscription here. There's no conscription at all. There's - you know there is a very definitive sort of hostile attitude towards, essentially, what lies on the other side of the border.

There's a feeling that neutral Eire is a potential threat that, basically, my people could invade at any moment. You know, sort of, I don't know where we get the resources or the guns to do it, but essentially there is this omnipresent threat that is felt by one side of the population in Northern Ireland, which, actually, to be quite honest with you, it's not so much a threat. There's just an ongoing sort of Cold War type hostility between two different governments, one in Belfast, which is unionist-dominated and one in Dublin, which is basically dominated by de Valera's Fianna Fail and, you know, it's a sort of, a Catholic-dominated culture in the South. So, you have basically two poles, really, and Northern Ireland is caught between these two forces and that is the backdrop in which Northern Ireland ends up giving this actually very Herculean war effort in terms of what it actually produces.

Yesterday, for instance, I landed at Belfast City Airport. There's two airports, Belfast International Belfast City Airport, which is called George Best Airport after the famous footballer. And that airport - that airfield I landed on was used for the takeoff of maybe 1,200 completed Stirling bombers that were manufactured in Belfast that supplemented Bomber Command's effort to essentially take the bombing war to Nazi Germany. That's 1,200 Stirling bombers, not leaving aside any other aircraft that were built at that works like, including about nearly 300 Short Sunderland's and just about a mile and a half away, you have the Harland & Wolff docks where, I don't know, an incredible number, about 300 warships and 200 ships repaired.

Scott

Yeah, it's certainly a phenomenal amount were built. And I think there's, there's a number around 22,000 thousand - numbers of repairs and refits and all of that carried out as well. And then you've got the Short & Harland Aircraft Factory, got the Harland & Wolff shipyard. You've got the Belfast Rope works, which is the largest in the world at the time. Because you build a lot of large ships, you need a lot of rope.

Joseph

I did not. I did not know that.

Scott

Yeah, the largest rope works in the world. It's now the Conn's Water shopping centre for any listeners in Belfast. The other, there's actually a lot of streets that run off at that shopping centre, which are just these really, really long, narrow streets, and that's where they used to unfurl all of the - you need just a phenomenal long, thin, narrow place to roll out all these ropes. Yeah. I mean, in terms of linen production as well, we were making a huge percentage of military uniforms. There was a quote from someone, who I can't quite remember, but it was said that the Battle of Britain was won on Ulster wings because the Ulster linen was used as the covering for the Hurricanes. Yeah.

Joseph

Yes, Hurricanes. Yes, that's right. Yes, essentially, it was, yeah, there's various different names for the linen like referred to as Irish linen or Ulster linen. It's kind of it's a strange one, but it's basically, yeah, it's Northern Ireland manufactured linen was used to basically cover the wing struts on Hurricane fighters. So, essentially every Hurricane that flew during the Battle of Britain was at least partially manufactured in Northern Ireland and it's a homage to essentially the, you know, the pre-war metal airframe aircraft that were flying that were commonplace in the 1930s and the Hurricane is a sort of a halfway house between those aircraft and the aircraft that came after, such as the Spitfire and various others to follow that were all metal framed. But the thing is that, yeah, again you have you have also a massive textile industry. I mean a phenomenal statistic was put out about the amount of uniforms, tunics, parachutes that were modified parachutes were manufactured here. I think I cracked a joke once about the fact that Northern Ireland, the greater Belfast area, produced 1,000,000 bayonets. And, you know, sort of been thinking of the line from, uh, Dad's Army, “They don't like it up em”.

You know, it's just incredible the amount of war material that's made.

Scott

Yeah, so many other factories that had existed pre-war turned themselves over to that effort almost overnight. You know, it was - you went from being somewhere that maybe manufactured - people were manufacturing furniture and people who are manufacturing kind of woodworking and things just all of a sudden turn their tools to manufacturing, you know, shells, mortars. My grandmother worked in a mill in Portadown, County Armagh, about 40 miles outside Belfast. Before the war, she was part of the textile trade. You know, I'm not sure what exactly - she operated a loom, but during the war the entire factory turned over to manufacturing munitions. And my grandfather, her husband, was in 7th Royal Tank Regiment. And for the rest of her life, her thing was, “I made the bullets and your grandpa fired them.” And that was - that was their little family contribution to the war.

Yeah, so many factories across Northern Ireland like that. They just instantly gave themselves over to the war effort and produced a phenomenal kind of material and - not to mention food. We had a huge agricultural industry here, pre-war, during the war and, you know, the amount of eggs and dairy and things that we were able to supplement the British mainland with was phenomenal. Yeah. And that's before you even get into the black market of what was coming up from what was then Eire, so.

Joseph

Yeah, absolutely. Also, there was another thing that, sort of, because we're talking, we're getting into Home Front here. Did much of what came into at today's Collection Day connect with Home Front in any meaningful way? Because, actually quite a lot of what we're getting generally coming into the online archive connects with Home Front and in the UK. And as I made the point in a recent podcast interview, Homefront History, that's you know - the Second World War was, from Britain's point of view, largely a Home Front war, because from 40 to 44, really, you had a large portion of Britain's forces, both Royal Air Force, Royal Navy and Army concentrated in the UK, with the rest of the population basically slumming it, and everybody was basically in it. They weren't - it wasn't as if they were on a front - there were other theatres, of course, but the concentration was within the UK, the island fortress, so it was actually a Home Front war.

And, to what extent did today's submissions, today's stories and objects and items connect with the war on the Home Front in Northern Ireland?

Scott

So I mean certainly one of our contributors today was a lady called Julie Mackey whose family were rather well to do. It was - it was quite a refreshing take on life during the Second World War because quite often I study diaries and journals and things and they're very working class, they're very people on the streets, people who suffer during the blitz. They're phenomenal reads. But it's very much a working class, inner city view on life during the Second World War.

Julie was able to offer this beautiful, almost picturesque, idyllic County Down life, you know, and her mother basically was a letter writer, a corresponder with various people with wonderful connections across Ulster. And, beyond, she's actually published a book called Midnight's End: the letters of Helen Ramsey Turtle. It's well worth a read. And, of course, you, when this project comes to fruition, you'll be able to see many of those letters.

Joseph

Yeah. I hope to get her actually on and speak to her about her book and the letters. Because it's such a - she brought in one folder of letters from 1939. Just one folder from that particular year! And- but what's amazing is the diverse range of correspondence that her mother writes to - these are, I don't know whether they're equal or on a par with the significance of Moya Woodside, or is it that kind of a nature is, is it that nature of…?

Scott

I think they're maybe of a slightly higher level than that. You know, there are correspondence with leading politicians, with other quite wealthy families across Ulster. But, also, she just seems to have been someone who is a phenomenal communicator and I don't think there is anyone beyond, you know, beyond corresponding with Helen Ramsay Turtle.

But just as Julie was leaving, she just casually dropped in, "Oh, I don't suppose you'd be interested in my grandfather, who was in the. Home Guard?"

Joseph

Yes, I was there when that happened and I nearly lost my head, because this always happens at these events.

Scott

Yeah, I found that was quite a common occurrence today, where we - we focused quite a lot on people who served overseas. We had quite a lot of POW stories, which I didn't sadly didn't get to hear myself, but they've been recorded by our other volunteers. So a lot of stories about people who served Burma and Singapore, in Germany. And people overlook the Home Front so that, you know, we had that line from Julie: 'I don't suppose you'd be interested in the Ulster Home Guard?' I also heard as a gentleman was putting his jacket back on to go outside: "Oh, I had a great uncle in the Royal Ulster Constabulary during the Belfast Blitz. You wouldn't be interested in that, would you?" You're just like, of course we are. This is the - the beautiful, nuanced social history that we really want as part of these projects. So, these people have gone home, you're going to do a little bit more research. They're going to send us some more photos and some more stories, and we'll bring those to you.

Joseph

Absolutely. And I think there's also a few more people who may actually end up submitting stories. And this is the thing like, I mean it's people, participants - understandably, I think, setting limitations on the stories that they send, not because they don't want to share it, but because they think that there would be a limit to our interest. Because actually and it's something that you find like - we only had for - how many people came to today's event?

Scott

About 15 people, but…

Joseph

Which is a modest number, but what struck me - it's - for us it's quality over quantity for us because you know, obviously, these events have so much duration. But the sheer volume of material that came in today, it was just absolutely astonishing and it was just - and there was such a breadth and range of it. And all of it - all of it from what I've listened to - about other stories that came in – all of it seems to have been nuanced and fascinating.

It's one of the extraordinary things about these Collection Days. They're throwing up amazing stories, incredible stories. Everything's different. Everything's unique and there's a lot of it.

Scott

I mean one story that came in I'm not actually going to tell any of this story, I'm just going to give a brief kind of teaser as to what this is about, and if this doesn't whet your appetite from wanting to know more about this. This was from the descendants of a gentleman called Samuel Quigley. He lived in a village called Muckamore outside Antrim. And Samuel served in occupied Europe, and Samuel had a bit of a romance with a local girl who's called Freda Kohl – KOHL. Yeah, they met. They fell in love. There is a phenomenal planes, trains and automobiles story of their journey from deepest occupied Europe, under the cover of darkness, by various modes of transports between work camps, labour camps, military camps right back to County Antrim, where they married and settled down and had their family…

Joseph

And this is a story that came in today?

Scott

…and this came in today. I had already been in touch with the family, maybe a couple of years ago, so, in my other role as the editor of Wartime NI. So, a little bit of it is published on there, but a different family member came in today and shared their take and their point of view on the story, so that will be one that's really worth looking out for.

Joseph

That is incredible. That is incredible. Wow! Well, one of the things I would say is that when I was doing the last interview of the day. There's always one person who comes to every event that has the 'Mother Load', like a treasure trove, a huge volume of material. And it takes time - we allocate, for instance… So, what we agreed today, and what we try to agree at the outset of most events, is basically a standard interview of 20 to 30 minutes, no longer than that. That way we were able to, you know, sort of get to everybody that's scheduled in, because we had people who were booked in and we only - had about, what, two walk-ins? Yeah, and, so the way we did it was we tried to get through everybody as quickly as possible, but because there was a backlog, and people who were

waiting to be seen. I ended up taking Dorothy down to the cafe where I dealt with her separately and went through the entire process with her. And I ended up, before I hit record, we were just going through everything she had - and my head was scrambled. I didn't know what - how I'm going to handle this. And this reminded me of an experience I'd had at a previous collection day where I'd also dealt with somebody with a sizable tranche of stuff. But once I hit record, everything fell into place, and I recorded something that actually could be a very long, maybe two-part podcast episode. But it all fell into place and she told a very wonderful, emotional story through the items that you brought in a lot of the paper, some of it objects, little books and notebooks and whatnot, and it was the story of her father who was in the Royal Army Medical Corps. Her father, Stewart Hughes, who was a male medical orderly, male nursing orderly, with the RAMC serving from 1930 until he was invalided out in July 1941. Eleven years of very distinguished service.

And during the course of his service he met, then Major-General Bernard Law Montgomery in Haifa, Palestine. They actually treated him, because he was ill and had to be loaded onto a plane, and he treated him and spoke to him. And he said, “Oh, where you from? And he [Stewart] said, “I'm from County Derry.” Derry, by the way! He used County Derry, just to let people know. And Montgomery appointed - this is one of these instances where Montgomery, or Monty, alluded to his Donegal connections, and he brought it up immediately as, “Oh, yes it was”, he said. “I'm from the county, neighbouring county, whatever my family are here, here and here.” And they had a nice chat and then they took the general - they loaded him up on a transport aircraft at the RAF air base at Haifa and he flew to the UK. And then after that point - that's in 1939 and, Stewart is sent back to the UK, and then from there he's deployed to France in January 1940. And while he's in France - he's only there a few months - the Germans attack in the West. They overrun the Low Countries, and then the Fall of France happens. And he's in Boulogne and he's evacuated. But before the evacuation of Boulogne, he gets to meet none other than P.G. Wodehouse and his wife, who are living in La Touquet. They have a home in La Touquet, and he becomes an acquaintance of theirs somehow.

And they remain friends, lifelong friends and correspondents, and one of the other items that you brought in was a letter from P.G. Wodehouse to her father – that’s P.G. Wodehouse, the writer P.G. Wodehouse! And also referring to the fact that - the story she told referred to the fact that P.G. Wodehouse was actually treated as a traitor by British society because he refused to leave France as it was falling to the Nazis, and he lived within German-occupied France during the war. And then, after the war, had to go to the United States because he was not liked in Britain. And he - he was branded a traitor unto the last years of his life, when suddenly that cloud lifted, and he was allowed - he was able, he felt he was able to return to the UK. But there was a very interesting - and then you think - you think, okay, that so that's Bernard Law Montgomery and that's P.G. Wodehouse. But there's another person in store. Now this time it's her mother. Her mother was a nurse, and her father and mother met, I think, in Scotland. I'm not entirely sure, I can't remember how exactly they met. This story was told to me, it was a very long story. But her mother, while she was a nurse, near Greenock in Scotland - who visits the hospital?

General Charles de Gaulle!

Scott

Wow, that's. I mean, there's – there’s just so much in that for one person coming in with one family story, it's uh…

Joseph

It's in her diary. Yeah.

Scott

An incredible array and range of people, you know.

Joseph

A range of people, yeah. But, and there's one other person. And this is the - this is the sad part, the emotional part of the story. It's one other person, her father's brother, her uncle Victor - who died during the Battle of Berlin, and this was in 1943. It was late 1943 and around November. And he was flying the Belfast-manufactured Short Stirling, and he was an Air Gunner on a Stirling. And it was No. 75 New Zealand Air Force Squadron flying out of Ely in Cambridgeshire. And they don't know how the aircraft went down. It could have been Flak, it could have been an enemy fighter, but everybody on the aircraft perishes. There were no survivors. And his grave is in Germany - you can find his grave. He's buried in - I think it's Rheinberg Commonwealth War cemetery. And that's where he's buried, alongside about four other of his crew.

So, they found the bodies and they were able to identify him. So one of the fascinating things was that very extensive investigations were mounted to try and recover lost aircrew who died over Germany and they did a very extensive investigation they - the Air Ministry and the Ministry of Defence, and they actually were able to locate his body because his service number was sown into his shirt and they were able to - they found - they picked up a body, they were able to identify it from the service number and that's how they found him and he was. They thought they removed the remains from common graves and he was interred as per Imperial - what was then Imperial War Graves Commission procedure - he was interred properly within a CWGC burial site at Rheinberg as per as per the standard practice. And there he rests today. And that's her uncle who she never knew, because she was born in the 1950s. So, a tragedy there and one - this man is one of hundreds of Irish and Northern Irish airmen who never came home, who served, you know - who disappeared into the mists of time, never to be seen again. The forgotten story of people who flew with Bomber Command and who were lost fighting with Bomber Command.

Scott

Yeah. Which is, which is also a vital reason for doing things like we've done today. You know, yeah, it's keeping those memories alive, keeping those names in people's consciousness, talking about those who gave their lives in the services, as well as life on the Home Front, and all that was going on here. Just kind of looping back around to where we started this. I know that conversation that you had with Dorothy - incredibly lengthy conversation that included Bomber Command, that included the Home Guard. It included Charles de Gaulle. It included P.G. Wodehouse. Included Monty, of all people. Dorothy was someone who came in to see us first thing this morning…

Joseph

And she had none of this.

Scott

And she went away and just went, “I might have a bit of a story, but I haven't brought anything with me. Would you like me just to nip home - and get something?” And that, I think, pretty much sums up what, you know, what a Their Finest Hour Digital Collection Day can be…

Joseph

Can achieve yes, absolutely.

Scott

Someone literally coming with empty hands and coming back maybe an hour or two later, yeah.

Joseph

“I don't know what to bring!” That's what she said. “I don't know what to bring. I don't know - I don't know whether any of this would be of any interest to you.” And, actually, even to the moment she walked out the door, she was - she was the last person to leave - and even to the moment she left, as she was just saying, “I'm just surprised that anybody would take any…” Because, and I think a lot of participants - when participants come to these events, they take a very brave step. It's very brave to do what they're doing, and it's very generous, it's tremendous. And you know, because this is crossing a threshold of privacy.

This is why, what I refer to as the ‘Greatest Archive’ is kept behind the threshold of somebody's front door. It's kept within the confines of their home. And these items are kept in attics, lofts, cupboards. And we're trying to - we're trying to get people to share these with them - in case they are lost. And the real risk with Dorothy, in the amount of stories that were there and the amount of material she had - that could have all been lost because she had to piece it all together from what she found in an attic. And she only found all of this, and came to understand the wideness of the story, because of the fact that an attic was being serviced. They were putting in insulation and they had to clear the attic out. And she ended up going through all this material, and reading through it all and putting the story together and that's how she knows it.

And that's why we're capturing it today, and that's what I said to her. I said, “If, after you go - after your time, who carries this story forward? How is it going to be maintained? How is it going to be kept?” That's what this project is trying to do. And I guess that's what we were trying to achieve today.

Scott

Yeah. So, I think if you're - if you're out there, and you're not sure that you've got any good stories, maybe think about putting some insulation in your attic. It's good for the environment and you never know what you might find up there and I know, certainly, from places like the Linen Hall and for projects like Their Finest Hour, you know, we're so keen for all of these stories, whether it's Homefront, whether it's meeting Monty in France or meeting Monty in Haifa, or, you know, P.G. Wodehouse in France.

Whatever the story is, you may not think it's of any interest, or of any importance to history, or to us, or you know. But I find, you know, in all the stories I research, people are interested, people want to know. People love that you will trust people like us with these stories and share them, you know, with the world. The interest is there, so don't be shy about coming forward.

OUTRO