

The Polytechnic and World War One

In 1914 most of Polytechnic life happened in the evening with a wide programme of classes alongside the social and sporting clubs. During this period there would have been around 10,000 – 15,000 students. In July 1914 Poly life was continuing as normal – in the *Polytechnic Magazine* there are reports from the marathon, there are advertisements for holidays, a report from the Boxing Club's trip to Paris and preparations for the School Scout Troop's excursion to Switzerland.

Although the outbreak of war seems to have taken everyone by surprise, the Poly had been readying itself for some time. In 1909 Hogg's son-in-law Vincent Hoare, a Boer War veteran, was inspired by the idea of the newly created Territorial Force (TF) and set about raising a company within the Polytechnic. To gain support he played on the Poly's sporting ethos as well as patriotism, commenting that 'the game is worth playing from a personal as well as from a national point of view'. Having raised a company's worth of men, he asked around the TF regiments until he could find one that would take them as an entire company, an early version of a Pals Battalion. Known as The Rangers, they formed part of the 1st Battalion of the 12th London Regiment, an infantry division of the 3rd Brigade of 56th (1st London) Division.

The Rangers trained regularly with evening drill practices, shooting practice in the Poly's rifle range, skirmishing training, and an annual 2 week summer camp. In 1914 they were on their way to their annual camp when they were recalled and mobilised, suggesting that they were caught unawares by the situation. They underwent 10 days of drill practice in Regent's Park, and route marches to Hampstead Heath followed by a training camp in Guildford. Although conscription was not in force, by October 1914 900 Poly boys had enlisted, 600 of which were in the Rangers. They were initially billeted at Regent Street which was more or less empty during the summer holidays.

The Poly itself responded to the outbreak of hostilities first and foremost by offering classes in first aid and nursing. Ambulance classes had run for several years at the Polytechnic so it was able to quickly increase the number of classes on offer to meet demand. The Archive holds registers for these classes which show a sudden increase in numbers, and the *Polytechnic Magazine* reports 1400 attending in the first month, with 7222 signing up by September 1916. Within 2 days of war being declared the 3rd floor of Regent Street was given over to the Red Cross, where female volunteers made and rolled bandages.

The August issue of the *Polytechnic Magazine* carried an appeal by JEK Studd for all members to involve themselves in the war effort however they could. The Poly building at 309 Regent Street became a recruiting station.

In September 1914 the proposal was made to start a roll of distinction. The *Magazine* remarked 'when we have this list we will follow the fortunes of our boys so far as we may, and remember them always at our members meetings'. This highlights two distinctive features of our archives with relation to World War One. Firstly the extent to which the Poly kept track of its boys serving abroad, and secondly the crucial role of the *Polytechnic Magazine* in maintaining contact between members and between serving soldiers and those on the home front.

Although the widely held view is that people thought the war would be over by Christmas, Studd's message in August 1914 suggests otherwise. He asked those not fit enough to fight to enlist as reservists, in case there came a time when they were needed. The creation of active service registers early on in the conflict shows a remarkable foresight of what was to come, in direct contrast with the extent to which it seems to have caught people unawares.

From October 1914 the *Magazine* started to include lists of 'those who did fall in' and photographs of the fallen. The first member to die was Lieutenant Jules Marie Paul Genairon, a member of the Polytechnic Athletics and Hockey Clubs. He was killed in action on 13 August 1914, serving with the French army. His death was followed by that of Quintin Hogg's son Ian on September 2nd. The following February both Vincent Hoare, Hogg's son-in-law, and Lionel Studd, son of President JEK Studd, were killed.

The *Magazine* also carried excerpts of letters home from serving men. This was a continuation of a tradition of men who had emigrated writing back with their experience and encouraging others to follow their example.

Those at home were keen to aid the war effort and the senior management appealed to the sense of family and camaraderie at the Poly. A War Fund was established in September 1914 and by November that year £30 had already been raised. Through fundraising activities such as concerts, sporting events, and donations the Poly raised £3,603 (over £155,000 in today's money).

The ladies also set about making clothes, in particular knitwear. There are few detailed national statistics of what was knitted, how many pieces, and how its distribution was organised. However, the Poly Magazine has exact details of what was being produced by the women. At the beginning of the War they started knitting a variety of garments, most likely from government issue knitting brochures. However, within a few months word came from the soldiers that what they really needed were socks. This was not only for warmth but to counteract the possibility of trench foot when they had been standing in water all day. The women switched to knitting only socks. The yarn was supplied by Quintin Hogg's wife Alice throughout the war, despite its steadily increasing price. In late 1917 the women produced 117 pairs of socks in 1 month alone.

Despite strong links to the Red Cross the women tended to send garments to the men directly, usually as part of a Poly Parcel of war comforts. More than 5500 parcels were sent during the war and letters in the Magazine from soldiers at the front suggest they were greatly appreciated and looked forward to.

Its central location and facilities made 309 Regent Street an obvious choice for carrying out much of the training required by the forces. A particular link was made with the Royal Flying Corps – later the RAF. Not only did the Poly provide enlistment and training services, but it also billeted and fed the men in some of its buildings. It provided a base for the Corps' Photographic School at Regent Street and their Bombing School at the Women's building in Langham Place. The Poly provided training for coppersmiths, blacksmiths, electricians and fitters, and manufactured munitions in its engineering workshops.

Classes continued much as always, with only the note that war might cause some disruption. In general, the governing body reported a drop in numbers of around a third due to the war, with annual figures of around 8000 students per year attending throughout the war, from pre-war numbers of between 10000-15000. For the most part the schedule of classes was unchanged.

In 1916 a special class in draughtsmanship for ladies was introduced, and the following year a course in dispensing. The governing body papers also mention special classes in electric, grinding and marine compasses being run for women.

The Poly was also heavily involved in the training of disabled soldiers, which was organised by Robert Mitchell, Director of Education, at the request of the Government. Initially he had been working for the Royal Flying Corps but was then asked by the Ministry of Pensions to organise work across the whole country. Work started early on in the war and continued into the 1920s. In 1919 the *Magazine* claimed that 1282 men have been trained, of whom 826 have found work.

The Polytechnic's clubs and societies tried to maintain a semblance of normality and continued to run as best as they could with the female clubs taking over the administration of them where necessary. Inevitably, the clubs suffered many casualties, particularly as the Poly's members were encouraged to enlist together and fight alongside their friends in what was known as a Pals Battalions.

A war memorial listing the 394 known Poly casualties was unveiled in the foyer of 309 Regent Street in 1920. In contrast to the World War 2 memorial, the fallen members listed on the Great War memorial are ordered by rank, perhaps suggesting that despite the war, class, rank and distinction were of much more importance than later.

In January 1919 reconstruction of the Poly began with large numbers of new members being recruited from August 1919 when enrolment started. In a speech in October 1919, Studd emphasized the importance of youth to the organisation's work and the need to look to the future.

The war had a huge impact on the Poly and in its wake we see a large number of club histories in the *Magazine* with members conveying the institution's history, memories of Hogg and their fallen friends so that the collective memory was carried forward and not lost on the battlefields of Europe.

Relevant Sources in the University of Westminster Archives

The Polytechnic Magazine

Available online <https://polymags.westminster.ac.uk/>

The *Magazine* features letters from the front, roll of honours, news items, information on rangers and recruitment, and the War Comfort Fund.

Photographs

The University's Archives hold photographs of soldiers, recruitment marches, the Volunteer Training Corps, the Rangers and the retraining of disabled servicemen. Some can be seen on Flickr

<https://www.flickr.com/people/westminsteruniarchives/>

Administrative Papers

The records of the Court of Governors and Finance Committee include details of decisions taken on Air Raid Insurance, training statistics, war time activities and the War Comforts Fund.

Active Service Registers

The Archives hold a register of Polytechnic members who enlisted including details of name, address, rank, injuries/fatalities, and demobilizations.

Course Prospectuses

The Archives hold prospectuses for most courses that were taking place during the War including special wartime training courses for women.