

The Wilson Art Gallery & Museum Information Sheet



World War One Postcards

The golden age of the postcard coincided with the First World War (1914-1918). With so many servicemen abroad sending and receiving post, the Royal Engineers Postal Division (REPS) dealt with over 19,000 mailbags crossing the Channel each day, culminating in 12.5 million letters and one million parcels every week by 1917 with a vast number of these being postcards. In order to keep families in contact, postal charges were waved in 1914 for soldiers, airmen and sailors. It was enough to simply state 'On Active Service' (OAS) on the card or envelope. The Wilson has a large number of postcards from this era in its collection. The postcards cover a wide range of themes from humour to delicate silk embroidery.

Postcards and Propaganda

Postcards became an effective means of propaganda. The destruction of France and Belgium were pictured and distributed within days of the first invasion. Images of 'German atrocities' were common, showing Germans as monsters who would kill men, women and children. One such example in The Wilson's postcard collection is a series of six cards which, when arranged a certain way, reveal the face of the man behind it all. Postcards were also used to ridicule Germany and the Kaiser.



Six postcards from the collection showing the face of the Kaiser



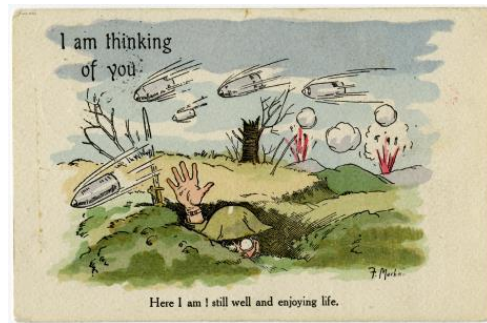
Bluebell' card No. 2

The image of a young hero going off to war for king and country was familiar on wartime postcards.

Typically, these pictures showed him leaving behind a forlorn, yet supportive, wife or sweetheart, thus demonstrating the expected behaviour of both men and women. Cards like this one from the collection which is part of a series of four called 'Bluebell', where honour and duty were greatly emphasised, made them a great source of propaganda, and a useful means for further recruitment. Depictions of individuals who had died as a result of their actions were also a popular means of propaganda. Figures such as Edith Cavell and Charles Fryatt were effectively martyred through the media after their executions by the Germans in 1915 and 1916 respectively.

Lightening the mood

A number of British postcards used humour, such as the cartoon images known as the '**Sketches of a Tommy's life**' drawn by a Canadian, Fergus H E Mackain (1887-1924). This collection of four groups of 10 postcards documented the life of a new recruit from sign-up to serving on the front line. Others of the same style and subject by Mackain were also released. He enlisted in the UK as a Private in the 23rd Royal Fusiliers and was later transferred to the Army Service Corps after he was wounded in the Battle of Delville Wood in 1916. Perhaps because of this, there is an underlying darkness to the postcards, despite their humour, with a real understanding of what it meant to be a soldier on the Western Front.



A postcard by Mackain

and



Embroidered card showing the Allied countries

Another range of postcards which are found in the Wilson's collection are a series of **silk embroidered** cards. First produced in the early 1900s, they became immensely popular during the First World War providing a stark contrast to the reality of the situation. Made by French and Belgian women, a design was copied many times onto a long piece of silk. The silk was then sent to factories to be cut and mounted onto card. They covered a range of topics and, as demand for them increased, the entire production was moved to Parisian factories. It is estimated that as many as 10 million of these cards were made. Some included a pocket where a small card

or handkerchief could be placed. The cost of the cards alone could be as much as three days' pay for an average soldier.

The censor

Mail sent from those on active service had to be approved by the censor; an officer of the battalion who would check each piece, striking out any offending sections. Typical taboo subjects included current location, defences, battles or casualties. If the item passed the censor it would be stamped with a number. The shape of the stamp changed each year:

1914 – circle and square

1915 – triangle

1916 – hexagon and oval

1917 – rectangle

Egypt and Salonkia (1917) – octagon

Italy (1918) – shield

Censorship was intended to stop information from being intercepted and also to prevent concern back home. However, censorship was crude with the offending areas just being crossed out with a blue pencil and would often still be legible.

Field Service Postcard

These simple, buff-coloured cards had selection of pre-printed messages that the soldier would delete as appropriate. Apart from name and address, nothing else was to be written on the card or it would be destroyed. While censorship was a factor, their main purpose was to quickly send word home that the soldier was alive and (hopefully) well. Because of the limited topics on these cards they were not subject to the army censor and could be posted straight away.

To find out more about the collections held by the museum contact:
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