

Teresa Murjas, *The First World War in Biscuits* (2014)

This was a museum installation commissioned by Reading Museum with funding from Arts Council England, to coincide with the national commemoration of World War I (WW1). It comprised static displays of Museum artefacts, wall panels, three screens with looped videos, and audio interview recordings. The installation was subsequently shown at The Minories gallery in Colchester. Photographs from the exhibition venues are included below, with embedded links to the exhibition's video and audio content.

This component of my *Animating Archival Histories* output is discussed and explained, in the context of the output as a whole, in another component, my refereed journal article Murjas, T., "The Biscuit Town': Digital Practice, Spatiality and Discoverability in Reading's Heritage Sector" (2020).

Collaborators in the research process were Dr James Rattee (film-maker), Sonya Chenery (postgraduate student research assistant) and Laura Farrell (temporary research assistant).



Figure 1 The FWWIB exhibition seen from the Madejski gallery entrance, Reading Museum.



Figure 2 The FWWIB exhibition repurposed for The Minories gallery, Colchester.

Research questions

How could the impact of World War I (WW1) on Reading be communicated, using selected artefacts that represent a 'history from below'?

How could such an exhibition be created for a restricted indoor gallery space among other displays, with minimal sonic overspill from audio-visual elements and for a wide range of Museum users?

How could selected artefacts from Reading's major employer Huntley & Palmer (H&P) be used to explore relationships between the imperatives of a business institution supplying war provisions and the business's employees and consumers?

How did soldiers supplied with H&P biscuits use the goods supplied to them, as food rations and for other unintended purposes, and what do the uses of H&P biscuits reveal about attitudes to WW1 amongst soldiers and civilians?

How could close-up macro camera footage of Museum objects, private listening to audio-recorded interviews and display of small, intimate Museum objects, give visitors access to the sensory materiality of the stories told by the exhibition about H&P biscuits in WW1?

How can uses of, and attitudes to, WW1 artefacts and experiences be represented in the exhibition by selected Museum objects, specially shot video and audio recordings, all integrated to allow multiple kinds of user interaction with the exhibition at a range of levels of engagement?



Figure 3 Display case: Museum artefacts with explanatory labelling



Figure 4 One of several century-old modified ration biscuits held in Reading Museum’s Huntley & Palmers collection. As exhibited at The Minories, Colchester.

Research process

The exhibition was developed over a 6 month period, in consultation with two Reading Museum curators who gave me access to the Museum’s WW1 artefacts, mainly comprising weapons and medals. The inventory also included over 4,000 items from the H&P Collection. H&P were a major employer in the early 20th century in Reading’s key industry of biscuit-making, and their biscuits and tins were supplied to the British Army and Empire forces throughout World War I. I chose objects and led the creation of video and audio resources to show how everyday items (biscuits) could connect large-scale histories to local experiences, and link Reading people to broader historical narratives of WW1.

I led the scripting, shooting and editing (with assistance from Dr James Rattee) of three videos. One was a 30-minute linear narrative of H&P’s management policies, 1914-18 ([FWWIB LH Screen](#)), showing how the company negotiated Quaker values with wartime business continuity. This alluded to early 20th century cinema through its use of inter-titles. A second video ([FWWIB Centre Screen](#)) used macro close-up to explore the appearance, texture and dimensions of several century-old WW1 ration biscuits, both modified (as in Figure 4 above) and unmodified, held in Reading Museum’s H & P collection. A third video ([FWWIB RH Screen](#)) was location-shot at a WW1 trench reconstruction site based in historian Andrew Robertshaw’s back garden (in the UK). The video featured Robertshaw cooking food in his trench using army biscuits mixed with other rations, following a process typically used by WW1 soldiers. These particular biscuits had been baked using original ration biscuit recipes. The videos were shown in a loop on three large LCD screens (one portrait, two landscape) fixed to panels that showed an enlarged 19th century colour print backdrop of the H&P factory in Reading.



Figure 5 The portrait LCD screen displaying the macro lens footage of a century-old army ration biscuit's surface.

I sourced, conducted, recorded and edited three audio interviews that were accessible through a wall-mounted audio player used with an earphone embedded in a traditional telephone handset (see Figure 6). The interviews were with WW1 food historian, Rachel Duffett, [to explain food production during WW1](#), local historian David Bilton to [discuss the impact of WW1 on H&P's Reading factory workers](#), and Andrew Robertshaw, former curator at the National Army Museum, [to explain aspects of everyday life](#) (especially cooking and eating) in the trenches in WW1.

A selection of ration biscuits and contextual materials documenting the H&P factory's and its employees' wartime role were displayed in two free-standing museum cases. I selected unmodified biscuits, and also biscuits that had been shaped into artefacts, written on for postal communication, painted and decorated.



Figure 6 The FWWIB audio interview console (foreground) and video screens showing close-up macro shots of a modified H&P biscuit (centre) and reconstruction of trench cookery (right)



Figure 7 At The Minories gallery in Colchester the audio players were located in H&P biscuit tins (following original designs) and could be accessed using headphones.

Research insights

There were tensions between H&P's Quaker legacies and values and its role as a war supplies contractor, revealed by the business history artefacts in the Museum collections. H&P supplied food, made shell cases and lost staff to army volunteering and conscription, but resisted the manufacture of armaments.

The exhibition showed that a banal mass-produced food item could be imaginatively transformed, as a creative response to material circumstances. The biscuits supplied to soldiers were used creatively as food rations, modified by processes including soaking, cooking and mixing with other foods. They were used to make vernacular artworks and messages to civilians back home.

As everyday food items the H&P biscuits were an effective means of conveying the everyday experience of WW1 and its multiple emotional impacts on soldiers and civilians.

The labour of factory production and distribution, labour of cooking in the trenches, and the labour of adapting biscuits into folk artefacts could be linked together through H&P biscuits.

The exhibition design could use the material and sensory attributes of the biscuits as resources that exhibition visitors could engage with, because of the everyday familiarity of biscuits today.



Figure 8 Biscuits adapted and sent home from the front, as a photo frame (centre) and writing pad with a joke written on it (right).

Dissemination

FWWIB was part of the Reading at War exhibition, planned by Reading Museum to coincide with the national WW1 centenary. It was a temporary exhibition (5 April – 16 September 2014) shown in Reading Museum's large, rectangular Madejski gallery, with other displays adjoining it. FWWIB was positioned facing the gallery's main entrance door and was immediately visible to all visitors.

It transferred to The Minories art gallery in Colchester as a self-contained event (16 May – 15 July 2015), at the invitation of the AHRC-funded Everyday Lives in War Research Centre.

An audio-visual version of the exhibition (without the museum artefacts) was also shown in the annual Whiteknights Studio Trail (an open studio event showcasing Reading artists' work), at the Ice House in Wessex Hall, University of Reading, on the 13/14 June 2015.

The research I conducted as part of the exhibition subsequently led to my collaboration with The National Archives (TNA) in 2018 for their Explore Your Archives campaign, in the Edible Archives strand. One result of this collaboration and of TNA archivists' engagement with The FWWIB project (including a visit to view the H&P collection in Reading, which I hosted and curated), an army biscuit from the exhibition was featured in a short item on BBC Breakfast television (Figure 4). A descendant of the soldier whose photograph is affixed in/to the biscuit was interviewed by the BBC Breakfast team.

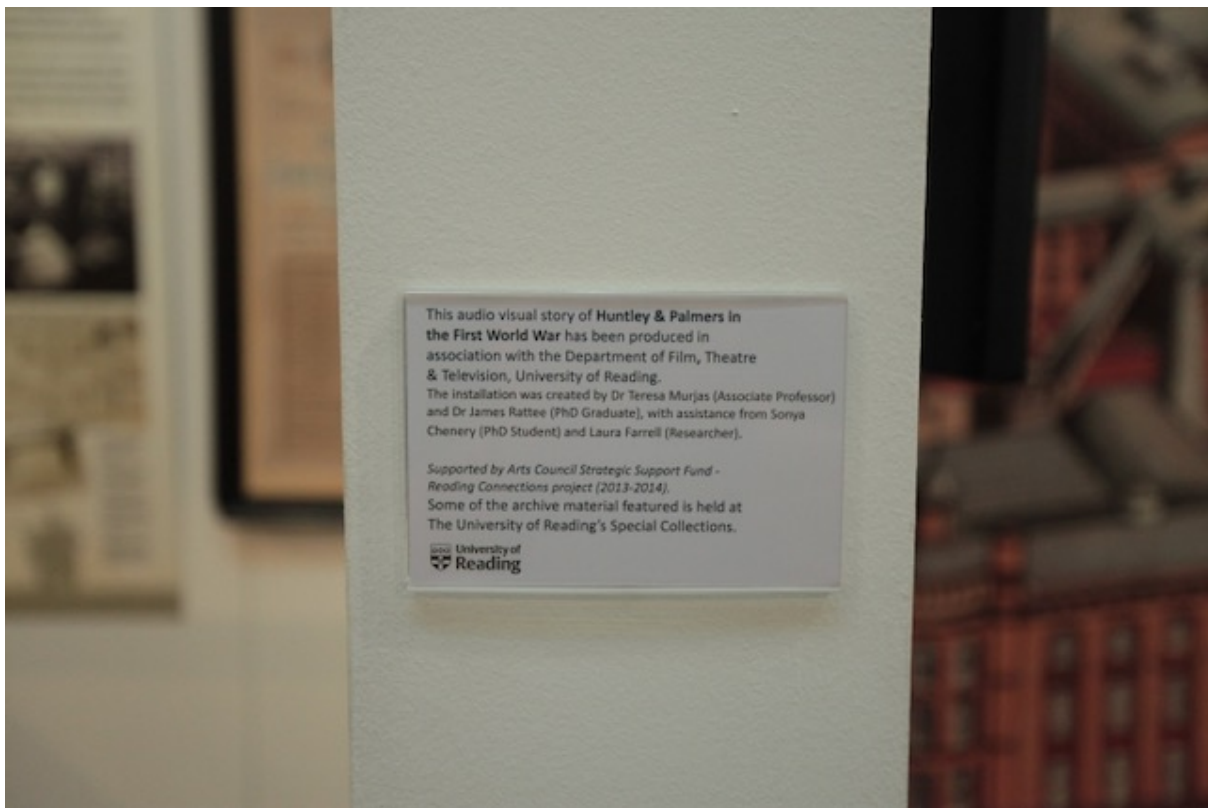


Figure 9 Reading Museum credits for the FWWIB exhibition creators and funders.