

The curious connection between Crocheting and Army Flying

Our Alternative Title is even more interesting - 'Air-Crafts: How the Army Flying Museum Uses Crocheting to Form a Tight-Knit Community'

Intro: Hello and welcome to Hampshire HistBites. Join us as we delve into the past and go on a journey to discover some of the county's best and occasionally unknown history. We'll be speaking to experts and enthusiasts and asking them to reveal some of our hidden heritage, as well as share with you a few fascinating untold tales.

Julie: Hi, and welcome to Hampshire HistBites. My name is Julie and today I'm speaking with Dan Ball, Outreach and Engagement Officer at the Army Flying Museum located in Northwest Hampshire, about how they encourage local communities to get involved with history through aircrafts. So, first of all, Dan, what is the Army Flying Museum? And can you tell us a little bit about your role at the museum?

Dan: Hi there. The Army Flying Museum basically shows how the Army Air Corps and its predecessors have changed over the past 150 years. We're right next door to the Army Aviation Centre, at Middle Wallop, and that's where some of the Army Air Corps pilots go and train as helicopter pilots.

The museum was opened in the late seventies and has actually undergone a massive change since those early days. Last year, in 2019, the museum had a big National Lottery Heritage funded project, just under 3 million pounds, to actually completely overhaul the museum, refurbish the museum itself, reinterpret our collections, our aircraft, our stories of the Army Air Corps and its history, going right back to the days of the Royal Engineer balloon pilots, through the First World War with the Royal Flying Corps, the Second World War of the Glider Pilot Regiment and the Parachute Regiment, the Royal Air Observation Post Squadrons and then the modern Army Air Corps, from 1957. We've done that through oral history projects, working with veterans, we've bought out several new aircraft on display for people to see that have never been on display before.

As well as all that I've been going out to a whole range of young and older people's groups, across Hampshire and into Wiltshire, working with them to explore some of these stories and respond to them in lots of quite random, quirky and unusual ways. So I've been doing lots of community engagement, art projects, outreach sessions, both in person and digitally, involving them in lots of different and creative ways. Up until March, we'd actually been going out, on the road, with our pop-up museum to lots of different events.

Last summer, we came to the Winchester Hat Fair and also to Winchester Heritage Open Days. So, we've been all over Hampshire, working with lots of different groups to inspire them and ask them to respond to what we have in the museum.

Julie: That's amazing. As I understand it, it's quite a wide-ranging collection or exhibit and also an interactive museum, which is great because you can learn by doing can't you?

Dan: Yes. One of the main reasons we reinterpreted the museum was that people wanted to get more hands on with what we actually have in the museum. So, a big focus of that was by making our collections more hands on and also exhibitions, collections, more interactive. So, we've had lots of new touch screen interactives that people can extrapolate information from. And then we've got a huge audio-visual show called 'Helicopters in Action', which shows and tells how the attack helicopter was developed for the army, right from the Gazelle and Sea helicopter through to the modern-day Apache that the Army Air Corps use. And then we've got lots of smaller, hands-on, interactive displays and activities. One of my favourites is, you actually have to put the Rolls-Royce engine back together and you have the different components, take them off of the brackets and put them back in the right order, then you press the green button and it should make a revving up noise so you can actually be an Aeronautical Engineer, a Royal Electrical Mechanical Engineer for the army, which is really cool.

Julie: Oh, I want to do that. I love putting things apart and then putting them together. Something that I think is quite special that you are doing is how we can learn more about history and be more involved with history by using crafts. And you've been doing some projects with, for example, knitting, crochet and so on. Can you tell me how and when this idea about using crafts came about?

Dan: Well, alongside going out to groups, one of the main projects or activities is to work with groups to create our community curated displays. In our cafe, which overlooks the airfield, next to the museum, we have our community display case, the idea of that is to fill it with artwork and creative inputs from groups. From last September, we've been inviting individuals and groups to create lots of different things that are linked to our stories and to our collections.

Last year we, invited people to knit Poppies and crochet Poppies. We had over three thousand in the end, we lost count. As well as displaying them in the display case, we displayed them around our aircraft so people could actually get to see them in the museum itself. This January groups went out to lots of Cub Beaver scout groups, older people's groups and got them painting mini Balsa wood planes for our taking flight display. We had about 300 planes and it was on display from January to March time and that was all inspired by the aircraft that we've got in the museum. With that, it's really nice because a proportion of the painted ones and the knitted ones, cause we also had knitted ones made by individuals sent into the museum, some of those have actually gone off to libraries and venues around Hampshire. So from now until the end of October, people can actually go to these places like Ringwood library, Lymington library and several other places to see if they can spot them, take a photo and then share it with the museum online, so they can actually say they've spotted one of these planes that have flown out from the museum to those places.

And then at the moment, we've got our 'Pilots on Parade' display and that was inspired by the predecessors of the modern Army Air Corps. I found a knitting pattern for a soldier, sailor,

airman from World War II. We invited people to make a mini person to go on parade. In the end we had over 125 mini people that are now on display at the museum, all on parade, all lined up, busy saluting, ready to welcome people. They're actually on display underneath our Islander aircraft, which is suspended in the air. As well as those, we've had 34 squadron flags and those were inspired by the signs and symbols that the Army Air Corps used to represent their squadrons and bases around the country and internationally. We had those flags made by groups in Hampshire. And those are all on display and everybody made a crest or badge to represent them or their group or the area that they come from. They're at the museum until, end of October. Some of those will actually go back. So the groups who have actually made them will then be able to take ownership and be able to keep their flags as a legacy, part of the project, which is a really nice thing to be able to do.

Then from November, we're inviting people to knit and crochet many medals, which will form a mass art display around our aircraft and so far, we've had about 60 created by people across the world.

Those will form a remembrance, in time for Remembrance Week and for the month of November. As well as those, we've been inviting people to create their own works of poetry inspired by are themes of courage, bravery, innovation and remembrance.

And we've had about 20 works already submitted. Those will go on display alongside the medals and they will be available for people to see online on our website and a selection of them will actually go into an anthology that people can see on the website, as well as, in hard copy.

As well as knitting, we're doing lots of creative writing and we're also working with army families based at Middle Wallop, Worthy Down, Marchwood, Thorney Island through our Young Eagles Youth Group. So normally, the children of those families who mainly live at Middle Wallop would come to the museum and we would do activities inspired by what we have on display. At the moment we've been meeting online and we've been exploring some of our objects and collections through a virtual way.

We've been working with several theatre companies and lots of artists and costumed reenactors, interpreters, to bring some of those stories out in a more lively and interactive way.

Julie: That is amazing. I think it's so interesting when they actually make something and they are a part of the exhibition. Do you have any stories about people coming in and seeing their contributions?

Dan: For the 'Pilots on Parade' display, we had one lady who had seen the news of the display online. She hasn't visited the museum yet, but she saw the project and thought, "Oh, I'll knit something". And she had knitted a RAF person with an eagle on his shoulder. She had sent him all the way from Canada. So the one she's made is on display and I've got to actually post him back because he's a temporary loan to us. But it's really nice because local people, have taken part as well. And some of them have actually come into the museum to see their pilots on display. So, during summer holidays, as I was putting some of them out, this lady came over and said "Oh, what are you doing?". Then she realized that the ones that I was putting out was one that she had actually knitted, which was really, really good timing.

Local people across Hampshire, around the Winchester area, have really taken ownership of getting involved in projects. It's really nice to see that personal connection. With the medals, some of the people who've already sent them in have actually got connections to the army and the Army Air Corps. So, one lady has knitted a whole group of medals in remembrance of her family's connection. Which is really lovely to hear and lovely that people are engaging with what we have in a more emotional and personal way.

Julie: Yeah, it's more personal understanding of history. And it gets a bit closer when you can actually see what you have contributed as well.

Dan: Definitely. Yeah, you've got more of a personal connection to not just the museum but also to what we have on display. And through the poetry project running alongside that, we've had several people who belong to the Glider Pilot Regiment Association and one of the ladies who had written one of the poems, actually performed her poem as part of a Memorial service, at Salisbury Cathedral last year. And there, one of the big windows is actually a Memorial to the Glider Pilot Regiment during the second World War. So it's really personal and makes what we have in the museum more relevant to people.

Julie: Definitely. So during COVID and lockdown, it seems like you've found a way to continue keeping up with community involvement and giving someone something else to do or help out in some way.

Dan: So when we closed in March, we had to stop everything and everybody went home, which was really sad to see. I then thought, "Well, how am I going to go out to groups?"

So, since March, I've been running virtual outreach sessions and I've worked with over 200, 250 groups, right across Hampshire, across the UK, and further afield as well including some in Canada, in the Middle East as well.

So we've worked with just over 6,000 people since March and over the summer. As well as the virtual outreach sessions, which show how Army Flying has changed over a hundred years or so, I show them some of our personal stories that we've got on display at the museum.

As well as that we've been running lockdown lectures, delivered by some of our trustees and guest experts, as well on a range of topics. So we've had from the Falklands conflict through to the aid and emergency in the late sixties to the formation of the Blue Eagles Army Air Corps Helicopter Display Team, which was brilliant. And we've had over, I think it's 16,000 views, of those recorded lectures.

After each of those lectures, people can submit questions for the panel, then they get the answer back in real time. We're just about to enter our third season or series of talks. The ones we've done before are on our website. They've been put into our catchup service so people can continue watching them because we're hoping to carry on with them, as well as having in person talks, hopefully, in the museum.

So those have been incredibly popular. And they're held once or twice, on a monthly basis. Hopefully, we can continue doing that as well as doing in person sessions. Some of those are actually, hopefully, going to be returning in the next few weeks or so. Which is really good news.

Julie: Over 6,000 people since March. That's incredible. And not just locally, but globally. That shows how something like this can just spread more engagement and the interest in history.

Dan: That was one of the main reasons for the museum's project was to widen the reach that the museum has but also form relationships and connections with groups who, maybe have heard of the museum, in its previous form, cause it was called the Museum of Army Flying until we reopened, last April. But not necessarily those who would have visited before or they had visited but hadn't visited for a long time. So, it's been a really, really good way to take the museum out to people also who maybe can't physically visit the museum and bring those stories to them and say we would really like to work with you. Hopefully then they will come back into the museum and see "Oh, that's what you were talking about in that session. That's that weird looking thing or that random thing that, that you showed us".

Julie: So you've got some quirky things in the museum. What's your favourite object or part of the museum?

Dan: Oh... that's a very hard question. My favourite things, as well as the amazing aircraft that we've got on display that everybody loves to see, is our Rupert parachutist. Now you might think why would that be your favourite? And that's because it's a child size dummy parachutist. Hundreds and hundreds of them were made for the army during the Second World War. And they were made from vegetable sacks and potato sacks, which were then stuffed with wadding or sawdust. On the back of them, they'd have silk parachutes sewn into them. And on the front and the back, they would have many fireworks or firecrackers sewn into the bodies. The idea was as the gliders were flying over to France, especially for D Day and other operations like Pegasus Bridge, they would be set alight, chuck them out the side of the glider. From the ground, it would sound and look as if more soldiers were invading from the sky, but also, it would sound as if there were more guns firing than there actually were. The idea was, when they eventually landed on the ground, they would burn up and leave no trace. So the enemy soldiers wouldn't actually be able to find out that our forces were using ways to trick and fool them.

About a hundred or so where you used at D Day. By using them, they actually fooled nearly an entire German battalion of soldiers into thinking that some of ours were landing where they actually weren't. And the one we have in the museum was actually found in 2013, in the back of somebody's garden shed, here, in the UK. This man and lady were clearing out their garden shed. Came across the Rupert out the back and thought "What on earth is that we've actually found?" They brought it to the museum and our team were able to tell them "Yep, you've actually found a Rupert". So, that one we've actually got on display was one of the very few surviving ones that the army would have used during the Second World War.

Julie: Incredible. That's just incredible. Just finding something like that in your shed when you're cleaning out. That is perfect. Is there anything else that you want to share about the museum or any of your projects?

Dan: So, at the moment, we are inviting people to create mini medals. They can be knitted, crocheted, and those are going to form our 'Magnificent Mini Medals' display in time for Armistice Sunday in November.

Alongside that, people can get involved with creating poetry and the knitting patterns are available to download from our website, which is armyflying.com.

If people want to go onto our outreach tab at the top of the page, there's a section called Magnificent Mini Medals, which is the name of the project, or they can request a copy of the pattern, we can post them out or email them by getting in touch with me, at the museum

People can either drop them off at the museum, hand them to our lovely people on our main reception desk, or if they would like to post them to the museum as well. And the closing dates for any medals or poppies or poems that people would like to make is the 1st of November.

Julie: Perfect. Great. I'm going to try knitting one myself. I have the instructions, so I just need to print it and then try and knit it because they look amazing.

Dan: Excellent.

Julie: Thank you so much for speaking with me.

Dan: Thank you for inviting me on and sharing what we have in the museum and our wider National Lottery Heritage funded project.

Outro: We hope you enjoyed listening to today's episode. If you'd like to find out a little bit more about what we've been talking about, then please visit the website, winchesterheritageopendays.org, click on Hampshire HistBites, and there you'll find today's show notes as well as some links to more information.

Thank you for listening.