

National Memory – Local Stories video segment transcript:
Artist Jan Bee Brown on Experience

Brown:

The first trip that we took was to the National War Museum at Edinburgh Castle and we were looking at the kilts and the wonderful badger sporrans of the kilted regiments, and the recruitment posters, because I was always wondering why would my Liverpudlian Great Uncle choose a kilted regiment to volunteer for.

The Learning manager brought out a small hammer, a toffee hammer, and I thought: 'What on earth has this got to do with the Scottish Regiments?' He was basically saying that this was the smashing of the windows by the suffragettes, they smashed them with a toffee hammer because it fitted in their handbag and because it was a domestic implement, so they wouldn't feel like a criminal carrying it. And the whole fracturing of a world seemed to me a really interesting visual metaphor.

This has fed into my work to the point where I've been looking much more at my aunt's role in the First World War. She went to work at port Sunlight Soap Factory, thinking that she was just going to pack soap. So within this factory during the First World War, the byproduct of soap was glycerine, which was used in explosives and in fact, the factory was then given over to munitions work and also their laboratories made the precursor to mustard gas. And of course the gas was always a problem for the kilted regiments, because it attacked and blistered any skin which was naked and moist. Not very pleasant for anybody wearing a kilt.

One of the things that we heard today at the Museum of Flight was that they tried to wrap the wooden structure of an airplane in brown paper in Scotland and it caught fire so they then decided to wrap the wooden structure in Irish linen, and then really related to part of my story. And it started me thinking about Bertha wrapping the soap, Aunt Bet. My great uncle arrived in France on Christmas day, 1915, that idea of wrapping things, wrapping presents, wrapping lives, keeps repeating in my head.