

‘War’s Hell!’ the Battle of Mametz Wood in Art



Information for teachers

Introduction

The exhibition **‘War’s Hell!’ the Battle of Mametz Wood in Art**, taking place at **National Museum Cardiff** from **30th April - 4th September 2016**, explores the responses of artists and poets to one of the fiercest battles involving Welsh regiments of the First World War.

During the battle, from 7th to 12th July 1916, the 38th (Welsh) Division fought to take control of Mametz Wood in northern France as part of the wider Somme offensive. It was at great human cost. In five days four thousand soldiers from The Welsh Division were killed, injured or declared missing in action

The title for the exhibition is taken from Robert Graves’s emotive poem, *A Dead Boche*, 1917. He was one of several poets and artists who experienced the Battle of Mametz Wood first-hand.

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Notes for teachers

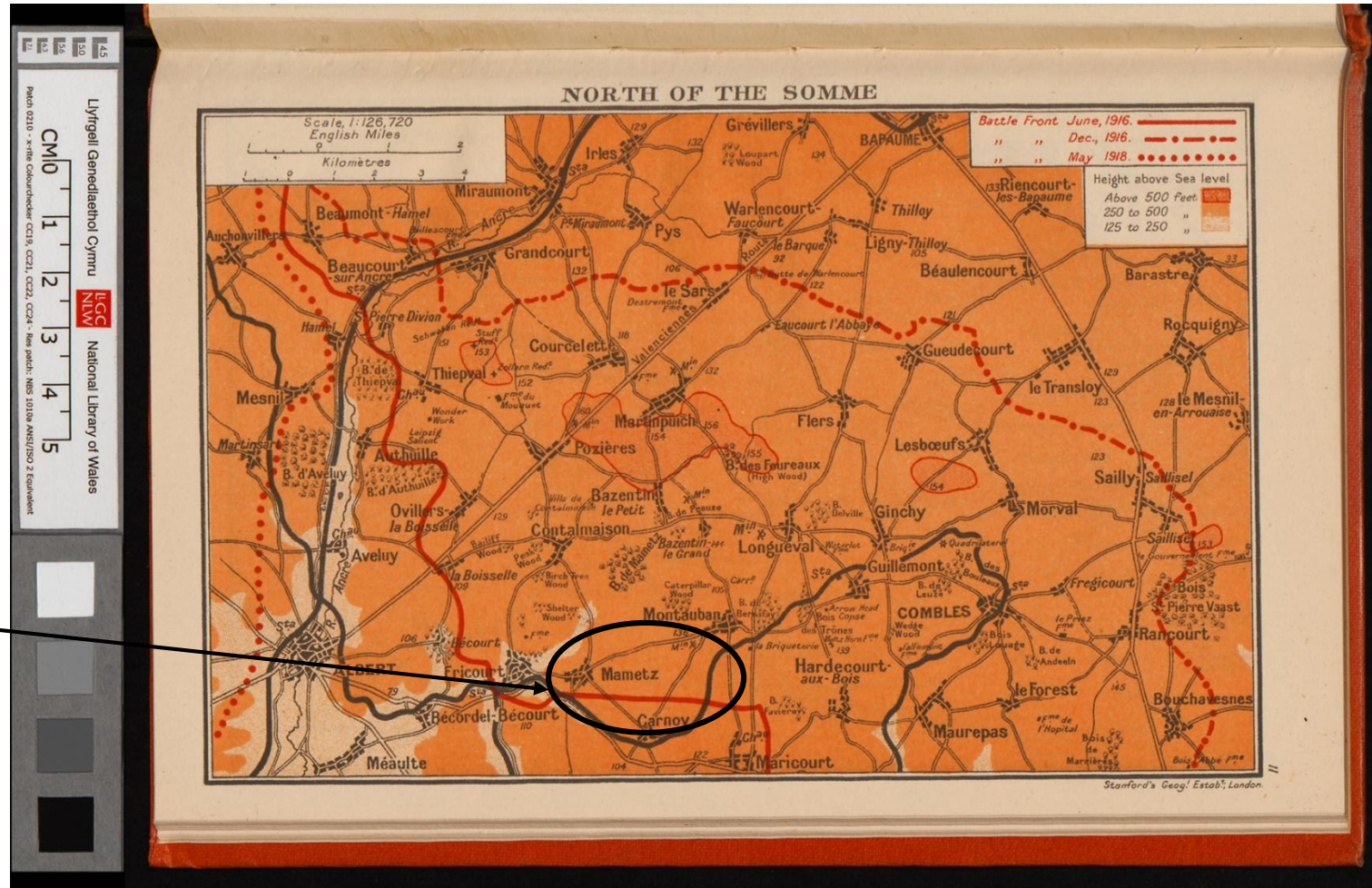
- This resource outlines the structure of the exhibition.
- Useful questions to stimulate pupil reactions and develop an understanding of the battle, the artworks and poetry are highlighted on the slides.
- Links to poems displayed in the exhibition together with notes on the poets and some of the artworks are included in the accompanying 'Source' documents.

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Where is Mametz?

Mametz is in the
north east of
France

(Map from the National Library
of Wales)



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Mametz Wood

- Highly trained German soldiers with machine guns were positioned in the wood which was nearly a mile wide, a mile deep and thick with trees and undergrowth.
- Soldiers from the Welsh Division had to advance over open ground, through a shallow valley and up a hill to reach the wood.

Why do you think this made it very difficult for soldiers to attack the wood?



This is a photograph of Mametz Wood today. The dragon statue is a memorial to the soldiers who fought and died in the battle.

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What is in the exhibition?

The exhibition occupies two rooms

Room 1

A display of the work of poets and artists who witnessed the battle first hand.

Room 2

A display of the work of poets and artists who have responded to the battle since it took place.

The exhibition will show how the battle continues to resonate today.

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Room 1

Poets and artists who
witnessed the battle first hand

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Room 1

The First World War inspired an outpouring of literature and poetry. Through writing soldiers expressed their emotions, whether patriotism, heroism and admiration or horror, anger and sadness. Writing was also a means of recording eye-witness accounts.

Source 1

Select two of the poems displayed in this room or listed in Source 1. These were written by soldiers who served with the Royal Welsh Fusiliers in and around Mametz Wood. Read, make notes and feedback your comments on the poems to the whole class.

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Room 1

David Jones (1895 -1974) was one of the 20th century's most important modernist artists and poets. He had spent four years studying at the Camberwell School of Art when, in 1915, he enlisted as a private in the 15th Battalion Royal Welsh Fusiliers. He fought and was injured at the Battle of Mametz Wood. Whilst in France, he drew sketches of the people and places around him.

Look at the sketches that David Jones drew when he was serving as a private in France together with some of his later artworks. Take a close look at all his artworks. Can you see any recurring themes?

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Room 2

Poets and artists who have responded to the battle since it took place

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Room 2: Reaction to Mametz

- As soon as the battle was over there was analysis of the battle from a military point of view and the contribution made by the Welsh division was evaluated. Although many people praised the conduct and bravery of Welsh soldiers, others questioned the success of the battle and the conduct of Welsh troops.
- Lloyd George was eager to mark what he saw as the first major success of the Welsh battalion that he had put together. He commissioned the Welsh artist Christopher Williams to paint a huge work, *The Charge of the Welsh Division at Mametz Wood*, to commemorate the battle. It hung in the drawing room in 10 Downing Street before it was later transferred to the National Museum Wales.

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Christopher Williams (1873 – 1934), *The Charge of the Welsh Division at Mametz Wood*



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Room 2

The works in this room illustrate the responses of artists to the battle and its aftermath.

- Look at the painting *The Charge of the Welsh Division at Mametz Wood*.
- What do you feel when you look at the painting?
- What can you see in the painting that shows that the German soldiers were better equipped for the battle?
- Look at the preparatory sketches and studies in the exhibition or in **Source 3**. How did these help Christopher Williams make the final painting?
- Do you think this painting is a real depiction or a dramatization of what happened in the battle?

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Room 2

- The Battle of Mametz happened one hundred years ago. How do the artworks help you understand more about the battle and the First World War?
- Select two artworks in this room that help with your understanding of conflict and the First World War.

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Room 2

Almost as soon as the Battle of Mametz was over, the reaction to it began. Some soldiers recorded their experience at Mametz almost straightaway, but for others it took years to tell their stories.

The Battle still resonates today and people who were not alive when the battle occurred are drawn to react to it. In recent years the writer and poet Owen Sheers has written both a poem and a play about the battle.

Source 1

Select two of the poems displayed in this room or listed in Source 1 which were written sometime after the battle. Read, make notes and feedback your comments on the poems to the whole class.

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Songs and hymns

There are many accounts of Welsh troops singing in the First World War and today we associate songs such as *Keep the Home Fires Burning* with the War.

Why do you think that soldiers would sing together as they were about to go into battle?

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Hymns and songs may have had many advantages. They might have:

- Helped to raise morale and bring the soldiers together.
- Offered a distraction from the shell bursts and gun fire.
- Been a reminder of home.

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Sosban Fach

The poet and artist David Jones heard the 14th Battalion singing *Jesu Lover of my soul* as they were about to go to battle at Mametz and Robert Graves recalled hearing Welsh soldiers singing hymns rather than popular songs:

"...instead of the usual music-hall songs they sang Welsh hymns, each man taking a part. The Welsh always sang when pretending not to be scared; it kept them steady. And they never sang out of tune."

(From: *Goodbye to All That* by Robert Graves)

Now read the poem *Sospan Fach* written by Robert Graves in 1919.(Source 1)

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What does the Battle of Mametz mean today?



- The Battle of Mametz still resonates very strongly in Wales. Perhaps this is because this battle was particularly brutal.
- The British army did not have the same level of skills and training as the German army. Soldiers were mostly volunteers. With only very basic training, they were ordered to “walk not run” across open ground and up a hill whilst professional German soldiers in Mametz Wood above them fired down with sweeping machine guns.
- There still remains a sense of awe together with a feeling of pride at the scale of the Welsh sacrifice. The site of the Battle of Mametz symbolises the Welsh presence on the Western Front during the First World War.
- Families of 4000 soldiers who were killed, injured or declared missing were affected. Today descendants still have strong connections with Mametz.

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“Mametz Wood became engrained in our memory. We never really knew what happened there, except that it was unspeakably awful”

(Elizabeth Thomas, whose brother Jack fought there)

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