The First World War began on 28 July 1914 with Britain entering the war on 4 August. By the time the war ended on 11 November 1918 over 10 million soldiers and 6½ million civilians had been killed.

The origins of the war lie in the complicated diplomatic ties that existed between different countries in Europe. The immediate catalyst for the war was the assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, in Sarajevo on 28 June 1914. The assassination was used by the Austro-Hungarian Empire as a pretext for declaring war on Serbia. Russia, which had long-standing ties with Serbia, mobilised its vast armies in defence of that country whilst Germany, which had a treaty with Austro-Hungary, declared war on Russia. These various declarations of war set off a domino effect with other countries joining the war in support of their alliances with the combatants. Britain entered the war because of treaties with Belgium and France. Behind these diplomatic ties lay a myriad of political and economic reasons for the war.

The four-year period from 1914 to 1918 was a period of enormous social change. No aspect of life was immune from the effects of the war. By the time the war ended British society was unrecognisable from its pre-war state; the principle of conscription had been introduced, over 1½ million women had entered the workforce, doing jobs previously reserved for men, and the barriers between different classes had started to break down.

The war led to the toppling of the Liberal government in Britain, helped women to gain the vote, caused the break-up of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and saw the abdication of the German Kaiser.

This exhibition explores how that impact was felt at the time, examining different perspectives on the war, from the British Tommy to the German Fritz, from the officer to the private and encompassing its effect on civilian life, business and the literature of the time.
The Fortunes of War
The Chaworth Musters, Harrison and Vince Families

Of the seven Chaworth Musters brothers of Annesley Park and Colwick Hall, Nottinghamshire, six fought in the First World War: Patricius, Jack, Anthony, Philip, Robert and Douglas. Only half of them were to return.

Devastatingly for their parents both Pat and Philip were to become the victims of ‘friendly fire’. First to die was the eldest brother, Pat, who contracted blood poisoning after being hit by a British shell. Despite attempts to save his life by amputating his arm he died in January 1915 aged 26.

His younger brother Philip survived him by just over two years. On 17 July 1917 he too was hit by a British shell and killed instantly aged 22. Robert Chaworth Musters wrote to his parents after learning the news of Philip’s death: “Don’t be upset because it was by one of our own shells again as I am afraid it always is bound to happen & does very often”. Tragically it was his own death in October 1918, only a month before the armistice, which was to add to his family’s grief.

By contrast the three Harrison brothers, Charlie, Frank and Jack, and the three Vince brothers, Wilfred, Frederick and Leonard were all to survive the war. Diaries and letters written by these sets of brothers describe the horrors of war and also some of the miraculous escapes.

Frank Harrison was on leave in England on 9 October 1917 when he heard that his company had taken part in an attack on the German lines, recording in his journal “Another big ‘do’ at Ypres. I missed it”. That ‘big do’ was the Battle of Poelcappelle, part of the Third Battle of Ypres. The fact that he ‘missed it’ while so many of his comrades were killed was to prey on Frank’s mind for the rest of his life.

One person who did take part in the Third Battle of Ypres, also known as Passchendaele, was the middle Vince brother Frederick. For him the timing of leave was not so fortuitous and he returned from a short stay in England to be immediately thrown into the horror of the battle.
Shaping people’s attitudes to the war was of vital importance to the British government. Until January 1916 Britain had a volunteer army and public support was essential in raising an effective fighting force. Propaganda was used to gain and maintain support for the war with the public being bombarded with messages urging them to ‘do their bit’.

Following the outbreak of war a Parliamentary Recruiting Committee was established aimed at increasing enlistment to the military. Between October 1914 and October 1915 the committee oversaw the production of more than 5.7 million posters and 14.25 million copies of books and pamphlets. Patriotism and the need to do one’s bit for King and Country were messages that were used to great effect. During the course of the war Britain mobilised over five million men for the armed forces, or a third of the pre-war male labour force. 2.4 million of these were volunteers.

Postcards were a particularly visual form of propaganda. Patriotic postcards were on sale within a week of Britain entering the war, many featuring easily recognisable illustrations and motifs such as the flag, Britannia and the British lion. Some focused on what the men were fighting for, portraying images of wives and children, whilst others demonised the enemy. Still others aimed at shaming men into joining up, often by pointing out how their non-participation would be viewed both by their contemporaries and by future generations.

While there were immense pressures on men to enlist there were those who refused to fight, on political, moral or religious grounds. The 1916 Conscription Act contained a ‘conscience clause’ allowing men to claim exemption from military service. 16,500 conscientious objectors appeared before a tribunal in order to apply for an exemption, with over 80% gaining some form of exemption. Many agreed to take up non-combatant roles such as driving ambulances or working as stretcher bearers. Around 6,000 men either refused to appear before the tribunal or rejected its decision. Public antagonism was focused on these men, many of whom were imprisoned and sentenced to hard labour.

Edith Cavell was a British nurse working in Brussels during the First World War who helped Allied soldiers escape from German-occupied Belgium. After being arrested by the German authorities she was sentenced to death and executed on 12 October 1915. Edith Cavell’s death received worldwide press coverage and her image was used as a propaganda tool to boost recruitment to the British military.

Poem published in the December 1918 edition of The Gong, the magazine of University College Nottingham.
An estimated seven to nine million soldiers were taken prisoner during the First World War, 192,000 of which were from Britain and the Commonwealth. The Hague and Geneva conventions covered the treatment of POWs but there were widespread allegations of cruelty and mistreatment on all sides.

Accommodating prisoners of war was a huge undertaking for all involved. At the start of the war neither side had systems in place for dealing with POWs. Makeshift camps were hastily erected, either by building from scratch or commandeering existing buildings.

In Nottinghamshire the new Sutton Bonington campus of the Midland Agricultural and Dairy College, now the School of Biosciences at The University of Nottingham, was taken over by the War Office as a prisoner of war camp in 1915. The camp was used to house German officers, the vast majority of whom were failed escapees from other POW camps. With up to 500 high-risk prisoners being incarcerated in the camp at any given time further escape attempts were perhaps inevitable. On 24 September 1917, 22 men escaped from the Sutton Bonington camp through a tunnel that had been dug to the outside world. They were all recaptured within the week. The Sutton Bonington camp was affiliated to the prisoner of war camp established at nearby Donington Hall in Leicestershire from where in June 1915 the German pilot Gunther Pluschow made the only successful escape from Britain in either world war.

Under the Hague convention all prisoners of war were allowed to send and receive letters and parcels free of charge. These were the only links between prisoners and their families at home. How often prisoners could send letters home depended on which country, and often which camp, they were interned in. In British camps prisoners were allowed to send two letters a week. All letters had to be checked by the censor to ensure they did not contain any information damaging to the country's war effort.
The First World War produced an outpouring of creativity as people struggled to make sense of the world around them. Poets, novelists, journalists and diarists worked in different ways to record their experiences of wartime.

The spread of education in the decades preceding the war meant that this was the first conflict fought by the British army in which the ordinary soldier was literate and able to write about their own experiences. The British public were exposed to numerous writings about the war, from letters written by their loved ones on the front line to newspaper articles written for a mass audience.

Poetry was one of the most ubiquitous forms of literature produced during the war. Today people’s perceptions of First World War poetry are largely shaped by the dozen or so poets who make it into the anthologies, poets such as Rupert Brooke, Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen. People living at the time would have been exposed to a much wider range of poets and poems. It has been estimated that there were 2,225 English poets of the war.

One of the most famous poets of the First World War is Siegfried Sassoon. A decorated officer he nevertheless wrote poems that bitterly denounced the futility of the war. Vivian de Sola Pinto, later head of the Department of English at The University of Nottingham, was a junior officer in Sassoon’s regiment. The two men soon discovered a shared love of poetry with Sassoon writing "...With these valuable qualities he [Pinto] combined — to my astonishment and delight — what in conventional military circles might have been described as 'an almost rabid love of literature'". In Sassoon’s autobiographical novel Sherston’s Progress Pinto appears under the pseudonym Velmore. Pinto’s own autobiography was dedicated to Sassoon.

In addition to poems, numerous novels were written about the war, both during and in the decades following. Novels written after the war often take an anti-war stance as writers reflect on the huge loss of life. Today perhaps the most popular novel of the First World War is one written from the perspective of a German soldier, Erich Maria Remarque’s All Quiet On The Western Front.
The mass exodus of men into the military forced women in Britain into the public sphere as never before. Activities such as war work, volunteering and fundraising drew their attention away from the home and family.

For middle and upper class women nursing was seen as an acceptable way to contribute to the war effort. Organisations such as the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry (FANY) and the Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD) were loosely affiliated to the military and provided nursing services both overseas and in Britain. In Nottingham VAD nurses worked at the General Hospital where temporary wards, known as the timber huts, were built on the front lawn to house the influx of casualties.

Prior to the First World War women's standing in the labour market was low. There was a clear division between 'women's work', based around traditional female roles such as nursing and domestic service, and 'men's work' which was regarded as more skilled. Women tended to be paid less than men and were expected to give up work on marriage, to devote themselves to being wives and mothers.

The war created new opportunities for working women. The demand for armaments saw 900,000 women enter the munitions factories whilst a smaller, but still significant number, were employed in agriculture. The loss of fathers, brothers and husbands to the war meant that thousands of women became the main breadwinners for their families. Throughout the war women were still paid less than their male counterparts for comparable jobs but for many the wages were an improvement on those available in the pre-war period.

Aside from work women contributed to the country's war efforts in a variety of ways. A vast range of local and national charities were organised by women to provide relief for injured soldiers, prisoners of war, war orphans and refugees among others. Government poster campaigns targeted civilians, reminding them that to waste supplies was to damage the war effort. Women were also used in propaganda campaigns by the state, as examples of what the men were fighting for and women themselves were urged to encourage men to enlist.