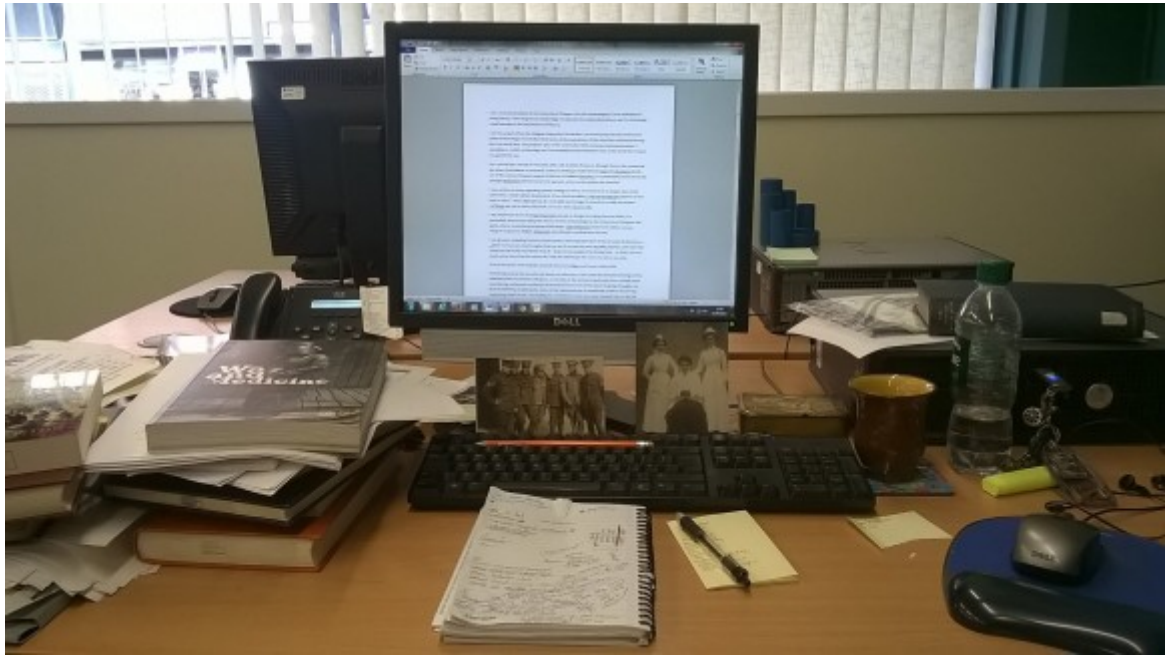


FIRST WORLD WAR FRIDAY

July 11, 2014 Jen Novotny Day of Archaeology 2014, Education, Historical Archaeology, Military, Post Medieval 1914-18, archives, First World War, France, Glasgow, Glasgow Archaeological Society, Iain Banks, Rough Castle Roman Fort, Tony Pollard, University of Glasgow, William Macewen



I am a [research assistant](#) at the University of Glasgow. Like all archaeologists, I'm an individual of many talents: I have degrees in archaeology, I'm based in the University Archives, and I'm technically a staff member in the Department of History.

I am the project officer for [Glasgow University's Great War](#), a research project led by well-known fellow archaeologist [Tony Pollard](#) that looks at the experiences of the university community during the First World War. The project is part of the university's WWI centenary commemorations. I specialise in conflict archaeology and I've excavated on the Western Front, so the Great War Project is a good fit for me.

On a normal day I mostly do research, with a bit of admin thrown in (though there is the occasional day when that balance is reversed). Today I'm looking at material from Capt JAC Macewen RAMC, son of the famous Glasgow surgeon [Sir William Macewen](#). I'm particularly interested in the younger Macewen's letters home to his parents. Letters to his mother are cheerful:

I have written to Mary regarding Sydney coming to France. Of course he is in danger, but, at the same time, I would not be despondent. Of our total casualties, a big percentage are sickness of one kind or other – often slight gassing & a very large percentage of wounds are really not serious. ...[T]hings are not as bad as they look. So try to cheer up generally.

I am surprised to learn that Capt Macewen was put in charge of treating German POWs. I'm particularly keen to pass along this info to another archaeologist at the University of Glasgow, [Iain Banks](#), who is

researching European POW camps. Capt Macewen wrote to his father describing the medical cases he saw:

I see all cases, including fractures, head injuries (I have operated on 4 of these today) & abdomens.... ...[T]he Germans are much tougher than we are & survive the most appalling injuries. One man I did today has half of his face blown away & a large hernia cerebri of his frontal lobe – so that I see very much worse cases than the others do. Truly the suffering in this war is not all on one side.

One of the letters even includes seashells from Paris Plage sent home in May 1918.



Wandering around the repository is always an adventure. I don't have the honed knowledge of the collections like my archivist colleagues, so my trips to the shelves to pull material are usually more meandering, sometimes resulting in dead ends (I haven't set off the alarm by going through a fire door in MONTHS). Exploring the stacks in this haphazard way is occasionally fruitful, discovering something I didn't know I was looking for. Sometimes I come up empty-handed. Even if I do, the journey is always interesting.