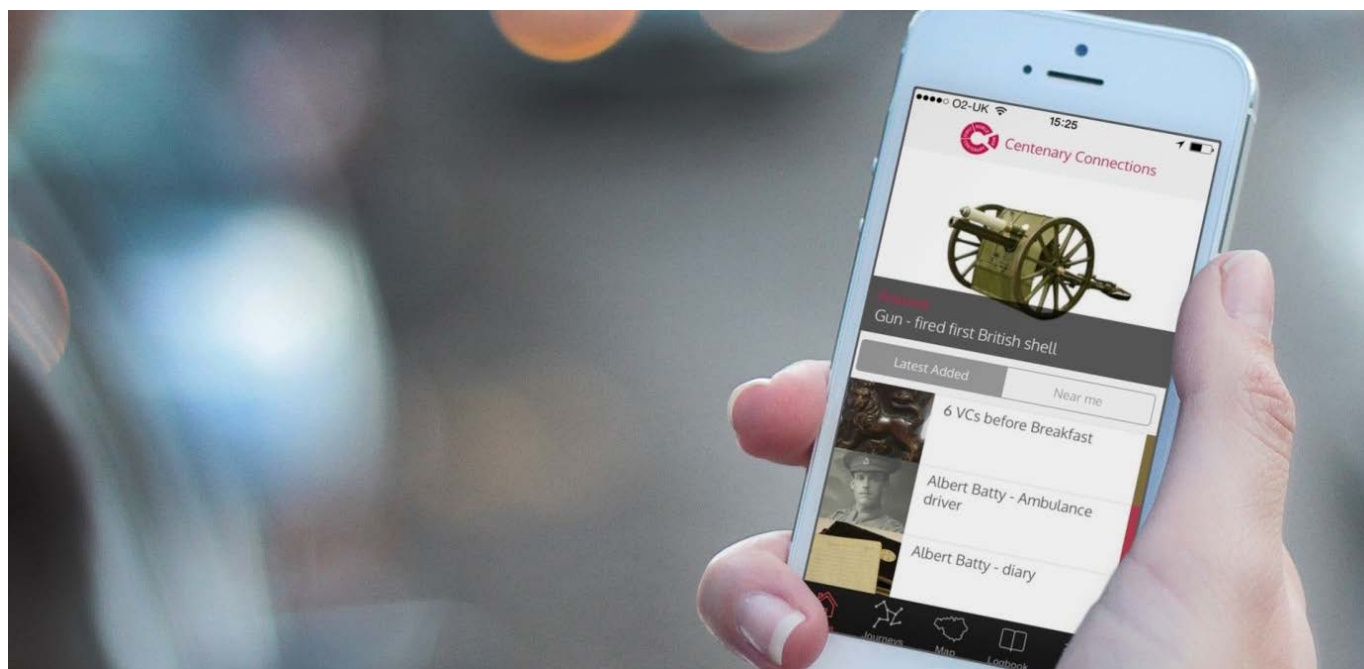


Case study

# Creating a collaborative digital archive



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## **Introduction**

This year, galleries and museums throughout the country are staging special exhibitions and projects telling the stories of people who lived through the First World War. We all know there are vast quantities of archival and historical material in our organisations, and a lot of it has been digitised. But how do you turn that digital archive into a useable resource – one that educates, entertains and is accessible to wider audiences?

The Greater Manchester Centenary Partnership set to find out. Led by Imperial War Museum North, 26 galleries, libraries, archives and museums including Manchester Art Gallery, Whitworth Art Gallery, National Football Museum, Salford Museum and Art Gallery, Greater Manchester Archives and The Lowry came together with an ambitious objective. Together, they conceived the idea of telling Manchester's story of the First World War, and combining their collections and archives into one cohesive digital resource.

Our company, Nymbol, was granted the remarkable opportunity of turning their dream into a reality. It is – we think – the biggest project of its kind in the UK.

## **Breaking down the boundaries**

The unique challenge of combining many organisations' materials into one digital resource is what makes this project so groundbreaking.

We led a series of workshops with IWM North and the 25 other partners, seeking to understand their aims, their audiences, the kind of content they wanted to share and the best approach for them. The team concluded that a content management system which powered a website and an app was the most appropriate solution.

It was important to us that the website and app should be practical and useable, informative, enjoyable and well-designed.

To make it work, we had to break down the boundaries between Curatorial, Marketing and Education departments, offering different ways of thinking about content for an effective online experience. It was decided that the app and website would capture individual objects, artefacts and images, as well as events and exhibitions, which together give new insight into Manchester's war story.

## **Audience Experience**

There are differences in creating experiences in the 'real-world' compared to the digital one, but many similarities remain – it all starts with the content and understanding the needs of your audiences.

Centenary Connections had to be appealing to different audiences with different levels of engagement and interest whilst simultaneously offering intelligent and historically accurate insight into World War 1 in Manchester.

Our solution was to offer different pathways or ‘journeys’, so that the content (images, documents, artefacts) could be navigated by interest. So if you’re interested in, say, Life at Home or Feeding the Frontline, you can find several objects from different collections related to that theme.

The casually interested can simply browse through different ‘journeys’, but there is also the ability to share with friends via social media or take a real-life tour through Manchester with the app as a guide. At the same time as offering new insights into history, we are moulding new methods of engagement and learning.

### Curating content

With digital platforms, there is no need to move delicate artefacts from one environmentally-controlled space to another in order to exhibit them alongside relevant pieces from other collections. Rather, you can make ‘virtual’ collections using online technology. As a result, we were able to group and curate the material in new ways, allowing things to be seen together and new connections to be made.

For example, both the Local Studies and Archives Oldham and Greater Manchester County Record Office had great pictures of the ‘Tank Bank’ which was literally a bank held within a tank, to persuade people to help the war effort financially. These images can now be seen together online for the first time.

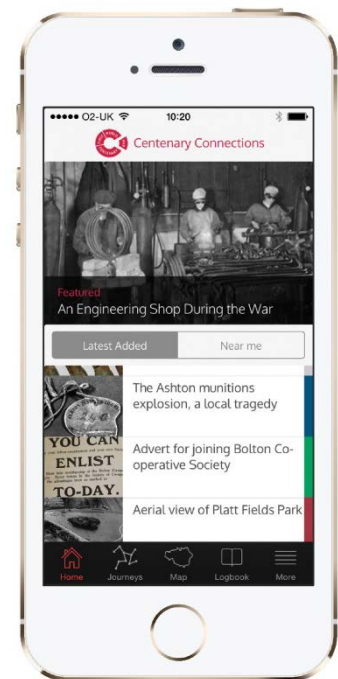
We were conscious of the need to have great zoom-able images of all the archive content for it to be viewed in detail. So as well as offering low-resolution thumbnails for ease of search, there is an enhanced viewing facility which is essential for old photos and intricately detailed documents and objects.

Many (but not all) of the artefacts featured are exhibited around the city. Where this is the case, the app and website provides information on where to find them.

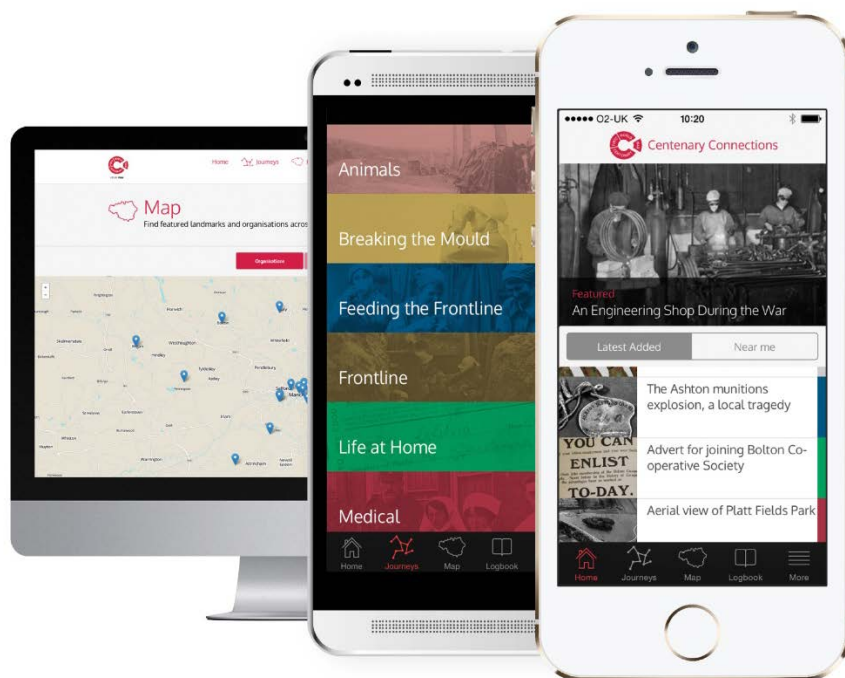
### Challenges

There are of course challenges to a project of this kind. Each organisation needs to be an administrator of the app, with the ability to update and upload new content as it emerges. We built the CMS so that it is intuitive and straightforward - and hopefully unbreakable – but with so many users, issues inevitably arise.

A major one has been tone of voice. Some organisations are formal, some informal, some writing in first person and others in third. So halfway through the development we worked with the Learning team at IWM North to create a style guide to ensure consistency in writing and presentation styles.



And of course there are always challenges with technology. We wanted a map view of the city, with location points for venues, archival objects and landmarks relating to the archives, but it proved particularly difficult to get right. It took many discarded versions until we found a solution that worked well for the user.



## Outcomes

Centenary Connections launched in July 2014 and so it's still early days to gauge its impact on audiences. We're watching keenly to see how people engage and use the app, but the organisations have definitely taken it to heart – Imperial War Museum North and other partners are already planning new content for release.

The outstanding outcome for me is that the app and website has encouraged organisations to see that the connections we can make through digital technology can be a profound tool for audience engagement – it shouldn't just be seen as a device to promote things. I'd like to see marketing, education and curatorial teams working together much more to see how far we can take this amazing tool.

**Length of project:** Six months, with two months design, three months development and one month testing. **Companies involved:** 1 development company, Nymbol. **Learning and Engagement Consultant:** Catherine Malihac. **Size of team:** One full-time iOS engineer, two part-time designers, one content developer / project manager and the Learning and Events, Marketing and Curatorial teams at IWM North.

[www.centenaryconnections.org](http://www.centenaryconnections.org)