

# Digging for Britain's real-life war horses

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Archaeologists from the University of Bristol have teamed up with school children, veterans of modern conflict and other volunteers to uncover the history of Britain's real-life war horses.

Digging War Horse is part of the First World War centenary celebrations and aims to discover how and where the huge number of horses and mules that hauled weaponry, stores and personnel to and from the front line were cared for.

The latest phase involved the excavation of a site at Larkhill Camp on Salisbury Plain.

Documentary evidence suggested this to be the site of a specialised veterinary hospital which would have quarantined and cared for some of the 500,000 animals commandeered from British families or imported from the Americas and Iberian Peninsula during the Great War.

Test pits were dug and a controlled metal detection survey of the site was conducted.

No physical trace of the horse hospital buildings survived, however, horse shoes, farrier's nails and various materials associated with equine activity were found.

The two week project evoked the spirit of the [war](#) with chefs cooking ration-style food for the excavators and a photographer documenting the event with a World War I plate camera.

Philip Rowe, from the University's Department of Archaeology and Anthropology, gave public presentations on artefact handling, the legacy of World War I, and a how-to guide on researching the home front.

He said: "This project enables researchers, young people and those effected by the traumas of war to work together. Horses were such an important part of the legacy of World War I and Digging War Horse helps people to understand the significance of horses during the war years at home and abroad."

Academics were joined by local [school children](#) and service men and women who have been injured in modern conflicts from [Operation Nightingale](#), an organisation that supports ex-soldiers' rehabilitation and skills development through archaeology.

The programme aids both physical and emotional recovery through using expertise common to both professions, such as geophysics, scrutiny of the ground, team management, mapping and the ability to cope with hard manual work in any weather conditions.

The Digging War Horse project will officially finish in March. The final results will be presented at an event where the creator of the stage production Warhorse, Michael Morpurgo, will be in attendance along with the iconic animatronic puppetry.

Provided by University of Bristol

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