Transcribing the past
European War Collecting project

- Began collecting diaries & letters in 1918
- ‘Good prices for good material’
- ‘to make available later on to the students of history, artists, poets and others, the occurrences and the feelings that the men experienced in the great struggle.’
Challenge

- Providing online access to the WWI collections
- Releasing the rich content from the handwritten pages through transcriptions
- Providing a simple search tool across all diaries & letters
- Delivering content ready for the Centenary of WWI program
Transcription Tool

A.R.L. Wiltshire diary, 17 March-8 July 1916

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Transcript:

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12/16

Got up at 7 am and after breakfast moved towards the firing line having a look round. There is a height cleared round it always behind the line in places where we must be constantly under observation. Drove up a road and passed the shelter trenches being built along. The battle went on through just above the CP and left dug out around. Pte. John was shot in the leg and told me of an officer who had 3 bullets hit his steel helmet and none went through.

Went down to East. Got 1 during afternoon. Stood to arms at 3.15 until 4.45. Cold and raw. All day there has been continuous heavy bombing at Ypres, probably by the Canadians counterattacking.

13/16

All night the rear of our camp was continuous to heavy shelling just before dawn 3 am and then continuing in a steady rate. A big battle is evidently progressing at Ypres and we are very likely trying to retake this lost trench. Just after midnight our Artillery Corps started out with the trench mortars. Flareguns under cover of an intense barrage. Altogether a very active noisy night.

Stood to arms at 2.15 until 3.15 when it was broad daylight. Men still in turning out to their alarm post. The dugouts being well aerated. A good many get not during the night coming in on them. Our trenches run through a building under which is a pistol tank. Lieutenant cut through by the trench and the weight of the superstructure is taken on beams and slabs. One man per yard here and as black as pitch.

Not much trouble so far. Went round with Sergeant Thursby inspecting the post and measured out enough cleaning up to keep him going with 100 men till the afternoon. Still seems there is mud everywhere and most of the men are piled up in their latrines reading & writing. All know the bombardment of Ypres stationed down to be succeeded by heavy gun-bombing. Our loss by 9th Field last night is said to have reached in 51 Germans being killed 8 (including an officer captured) also some mg & trench mortars. One less 1 officer killed 1 man invalid.
Outcome

• Over 69,000 pages transcribed from the WWI collections
• Over 600 volumes of diaries & letters available online with full transcriptions
• Over 50 Library volunteers involved in the project
• An online transcription tool suitable for a range of manuscript collections
Any questions?