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## **Shelf lives: Drawing out letters from World War I**

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### **Abstract**

*This article concerns the initial stages of an art residency with the Liddle Collection, an archive of First World War interviews, documents and related objects at Leeds University Library's Special Collections. The Collection, which has been awarded Designation for its national and international significance, was founded by historian Peter Liddle in the 1970s, and is centred on personal testimonies of wartime experiences. After outlining its history and current situation, the article focuses on my modes of entry into this large body of material. The enormity of an archive is likened by Farge to an ocean. To enable access, the Collection has a catalogue and cross-referencing subject index. With reference to Spieker, I consider how they shape the archive as I encounter it. Three writing/drawing methods (making notes, drawing diagrams and writing lists) have been used as a means to immerse myself in the Collection, map and process it as an artist. Finally, I consider Christov-Bakargiev's idea of the 'distracted archive' as a model to take forward.*

### **Keywords**

WWI

compost

Liddle Collection

drawing

distracted archive

remembrance

## **The Collector**

I was standing in the midst of a diminishing body of evidence, with memories unrecorded, going to the grave, and unvalued letters, diaries, photographs and three-dimensional souvenirs going to the bin – lost forever. I had found what I wanted to do with my life, indeed had to do with it – somehow, to undertake the rescue of this threatened evidence. (Liddle 2014)

In 1968, historian Peter Liddle began interviewing men and women about their experience of life before, during and after World War I. Recognizing the value of oral history, and realizing that a generation was dying out, he resolved to ‘capture’ their memories – their actual voices – as a lasting historical record. The attitudes of older people towards the war surprised him in some respects: ‘I met so many men and women who spoke of “their” war with animation, a gleam in the eye as if nothing in their later life had matched the intensity of the experience of those years’ (Liddle 2010: xix). This seemed to contradict the prevailing view that World War I had left a universal feeling of dread, disillusionment and bitterness, although undoubtedly there were numerous stories of suffering, loss and anger amid the testimonies.

Committed to recording a range of viewpoints and attitudes, Liddle made contact with people whose ranks in the armed services and roles in the war effort varied widely. He placed advertisements in the press and travelled extensively with his tape recorder in the 1970s and early 1980s, to gather first hand testimonies of those still living. As news spread, many personal papers and items relating to the war were donated by families of those who had already died. Liddle mobilized teams of volunteers to receive and process the donated material at Sunderland Polytechnic where he was then based, amassing cupboards full of it. In 1988, when it was consigned to the University of Leeds, three large removal vans were required for the move. For ten years after the move to Leeds, Liddle as Keeper of the

Collection, and his team of dedicated volunteer helpers, continued to maintain and develop the archive. During this period he began work in gathering World War II material, which he realized was similarly under threat. Some of these testimonies are now in the Collection, with the rest at The Second World War Experience Centre in Walton. Since 1998, the Liddle Collection has continued to be managed as part of the University's Special Collection holdings, and is now fully searchable online. It is currently receiving particular attention from scholars and members of the public due to World War I centenaries taking place in 2014–2018.

### **Safekeeping**

The Liddle Collection now occupies the shelves of a modern building grafted on to the back of Leeds University's Brotherton Library. To reach it, visitors pass through the neoclassical interior of the library's circular reading room with its imposing domed ceiling. Designed in the 1920s only a few years after World War I, the grandeur of the building reflects the aspirations of its industrialist patron, Lord Brotherton. His valuable collection of rare books is among the holdings of Special Collections. These books are treasures, lavishly bound and decorated. By contrast, the Liddle Collection includes hurriedly written letters on scraps of mud-stained paper, and tiny, battered diaries at risk of falling apart. But items that could have been ephemera, once delivered into this protective shell, become the objects of conservation. Each person's documents are held within grey cardboard folders tied with cloth tape, protected from light inside box files, in a temperature controlled, dust-free room at the back of the building. Boxes are labelled by the name of the individual whose papers they enclose and arranged in grey regimented rows on the shelves, each one a kind of memorial for someone no longer living. In this sense, walking down the aisles is like moving along a row of graves.

If a reader requests access to one of the files, Special Collections staff members carefully bring it to the new reading room, and in its clean, quiet atmosphere the file is opened to reveal fragile letters and papers, personal possessions small enough to be carried in a pocket: medals, postcards, albums of ghosted photographs, and from later decades, typescript memoirs, researchers notes and interview transcripts. Often there is a photograph of the individual whose remains are contained within the file – an earnest, fresh-faced portrait, or a smiling group shot. The Collection also contains a number of donated objects, for example medical items or battlefield ‘souvenirs’ such as grenades and helmets.

### **The artist**

I entered this archive as a Leverhulme-funded artist in residence in September 2014, affiliated to the University of Leeds Legacies of War WW1 Centenary project (2015). I had been struck not only by the stories contained in the Collection, but also by the way in which the material is safeguarded. The 100-day residency aims not only to work with the content of the Collection, but also to consider the processes and materials of archiving and to draw out comparisons between the care taken to protect these fragments of past lives and the medical care of bodies in war. The testimonies that Liddle ‘rescued’ from a no-man’s land between the attic and the tip, are now removed from harm, bandaged up with cloth tape and safely laid in rows – a form of healing perhaps. One of the outcomes of the residency will be a video that explores these parallels. However, before final artworks are made there is a process of getting to know the Collection, through reading, writing and drawing. Later in this article, I will discuss three writing/drawing methods I have used as modes of entry (making notes, drawing diagrams and writing lists) but first I wish to give a sense of the scale and character of the Collection.

In *The Allure of the Archives*, historian Arlette Farge likens French judicial archives to an

ocean into which the researcher dives. The sense of immersion in a vast submerged world is both tantalizing and threatening – one could drown (2013: 4). The prize is the excitement of direct contact with handwritten records of verbal testimonies that seem to collapse the centuries, and bring the dead back to life in the vividness of their accounts: ‘The archive lays things bare, and in a few crowded lines you can find not only the inaccessible but also the living. Scraps of lives dredged up from the depths wash up on shore before your eyes. Their clarity and credibility are blinding’ (2013: 8).

The Liddle Collection is not stored in subterranean, dusty vaults, nor is it huge in the same way as the French National Archives, but it is extensive and at times overwhelming. There are 4300 individual records relating to World War I, occupying more than 2500 boxes. In the early stages of the residency I talked to historians who use the Collection, to librarians and archivists who manage it, and to Peter Liddle the founder to gain some pointers, and as any researcher would do I dipped into the Collection’s catalogue and subject index.

## **Indexing**

The main system of cataloguing has a hierarchical structure. The Special Collections website explains the principles governing its archive hierarchies: ‘Wherever possible documents are kept in the order in which they were created’ (Leeds University Library 2015b). Within the Liddle Collection’s First World War section there are two further levels to the hierarchy. At the lower level, are the names of individuals, usually ordered alphabetically by surname, each with his (or her) own file. Here the key factors are provenance and authorship; the items within each file were donated as the possessions or testimony of one named individual and so they are kept together. At the next level up, the individual files are organized into categories that appear to have a spatial aspect – either geographical, such as ‘Gallipoli’ or related to areas of active service more generally, such as ‘Air’ (Leeds University Library 2015a). A

location also had to be found for the displaced, or those who did not fit, so there are additional headings, for example ‘Conscientious Objection’ and ‘Prisoners of War’, which evoke spaces of internment or exclusion. The final category, ‘Women’, includes the records of British women who broke out of their place in the domestic sphere and went overseas either independently as nurses or ambulance drivers, or with organized medical or military services. The ‘Domestic Front’ section also contains many interviews and documents, but elsewhere in the Collection women appear primarily as the recipients of letters – the mothers, sisters, wives, friends and daughters who those far from home needed to keep in touch with, to preserve their sense of identity, belonging, or sanity. The Collection has proved valuable to researchers, not least those involved in the Legacies of War project (University of Leeds 2015) in investigating the changing gender relations and views of masculinity during the war.

In his study of particular forms of bureaucratic archiving and their influence on twentieth-century art, Sven Spieker (2008) explains the principle of provenance, which was introduced in late nineteenth-century archives. According to this principle, items are organized on the basis of their order and grouping at the time of accumulation (rather than redistributed according to a set of ideal categories). He describes this mode of archiving as topographical in that it refers to a specific place, context or order in which the material was collected. It could also be described as topological in the sense that the configuration of material entering the archive is then logically correlated to positions in catalogues and on shelves. Both dimensions contribute to the archive’s particular features or ‘physiognomy’ when encountered in the present (Spieker 2008: 18). In the case of the Liddle Collection, the geographical and spatial categories of wartime experience into which the individual files are placed, constitute its particular landscape or character.

The Collection has another cartographic layer: its subject indices. These invaluable finding

aids are alphabetical lists of topics that cross-reference the Collection. For example, one can look in the 'Royal Navy/Merchant Navy' index to find a list of references under such headings as 'Mutiny and Disturbances' and 'Ships Sunk' (Leeds University Library 2015a). The most extensive index, running to over 12,500 entries is World War I 'General Aspects' index. This recently underwent a lengthy process of retro-conversion to put it into a digital database and integrate it with online search tools. However the paper version, filling four box files, is still available in the reading room. At the top of the first box file is an A–Z contents list of around 600 topics, a kind of index to the index. Many of the headings relate to particular battles or famous individuals, but others are more amorphous such as 'Attitudes'. The headings listed under 'L' for example, include 'Latrines', 'Liberation', 'Lice', 'Listening posts' and 'Love letters' (see Figure 1). Some sections read almost as a poetic inventory of the imperatives of war: 'Sanitation, Scouts, Search lights, Secrecy, Self-inflicted wounds' (Leeds University Library 2015a). It is likely that the interests of the volunteers, researchers and archivists who processed the Collection have influenced the list of topics, but subjects have been thrown up also by the documents themselves. The typed pages of references in the box files show handwritten additions and amendments that testify to an evolutionary process as the Collection was studied and managed (see Figure 2).

In discussing the historiography of archives, Spieker presents them not as unmediated 'primary sources' but as products of a technical process: 'the past we come to inspect in an archive is fully contingent on the conditions (and constraints) of the process of archivization itself' (2008: 26). In the case of the Liddle Collection 'the past' is usually accessed via the subject indices; those files that are not referenced in it are less likely to be viewed by researchers. However, the lists are contingent not only on the archiving process but also on the words inside the boxes – what it was possible to say during the war and what it was possible to recount years later in a memoir or an interview. In contrast to the almost



mechanical operations of the bureaucratic archive that artists of the early twentieth century critiqued (Spieker 2008), the Liddle Collection is characterized by a narrative of rescue, with its founder as the key protagonist, mobilizing others who became committed to the task of gathering together, respecting, caring and finding an order for, the fragments of unpublished stories and voices that otherwise would not have been heard again.

### ***1. Making notes***

I start by sharpening a pencil to a hard point. In the controlled atmosphere of the reading room only pencils are allowed, or at least that was the case before laptops, digital cameras and tablets made their appearance as recording devices. Ink, with its potential to spill out, bleed through and indelibly mark, is too dangerous. Making notes in pencil is an analogue process; I literally *draw* out the letters rather than selecting them with taps and clicks. My whole body is curled around the point as the letters unfold from it. The tracing of words in this way is reminiscent of family history research and longhand note taking before the days of computers and even photocopiers. Although I use the same tools for drawing, writing by hand seems laborious, taking time and effort. As I study the handwritten letters of others, often writing in circumstances of extreme danger and discomfort, it seems only fair to devote some effort to transcribing. Paper was a scarce resource on the front lines, and so letters home were often written on tiny scraps. I constrain my writing, sometimes overlapping sections and allowing others to be obscured (Figure 3), sometimes mimicking the handwriting. The words 'shell hole' for example, appear in a letter from an unidentified soldier to his mother. His cursive, flowing hand produces the letters 'h' and 'l' as a regular row of loops, a style which remains reassuringly tidy even as he relates the explosion of a grenade in his trench, which

[...] blew one man to bits & wounded the rest of us. When I came to, of course I thought I was in bits as I was fairly buried with another man on top of me but found I was let off the lightest of the lot & got a scratch on the head. (Anon. 1917)

He goes on to tell his mother how he ended up in a pleasant hospital by the sea. Subject to army censorship, the 'Dear Mother' letters from men serving on the front are often written in a lighthearted style, as though the primary message to be conveyed is: do not be alarmed, everything is under control, I am undamaged, and the war is not so bad really.

The pencil needs sharpening again.

If we accept the surface/depth structure of Farge's ocean analogy then this form of note making could be seen as a way of immersing myself in the substance of the Collection, i.e. the narratives that fill its individual files. As a writing strategy it allows me to open myself up to the details and affective currents found in the forms of letters themselves.

## ***2. Drawing diagrams***

The second strategy is to draw diagrams. This is a way of getting my bearings. I take a piece of grid paper and start to plot out key words, figures and the connections between them. A recurring feature in these diagrams is the circular shape of the Brotherton Library (in plan form, although I imagine the dome of the ceiling), and the route a visitor takes to access the Collection, passing from the imposing Parkinson Building with its dominant clock tower, through the Library to the modern West Building behind (Figures 4 and 5). In diagrammatic form, the archive appears as the retina at the back of an eyeball, or as the snail at the furthest reaches of its shell. In fact the shell, as an organizing or sheltering concept that holds

everything else together in a fragile sense, is one of the figures to have emerged from this process.

To put things down on paper diagrammatically is to configure my thoughts and ideas about the Collection and test out relationships between them. Making notes, as described above, works at the level of individual files, whereas drawing diagrams enables me to consider the Collection topographically, noting the configuration of its site and locating issues around it. The grandeur and gravitas of the post-World War I architecture is significant. As someone whose experience of UK higher education has been in newer universities, I regard these buildings with a sense of awe as I pass through them. In his introduction to 'Archive fever' (1995), a lecture commenting on the institutionalization of Sigmund Freud's home as an archive, Jacques Derrida traces the etymology of the word 'archive' to show that although it contains a sense of the original or natural (as the phrase 'primary source' suggests), it also evokes the power of naming and jurisdiction. The word *arkheion* in ancient Greek referred to the house of a magistrate or governor. This implies authority over, as well as protection of, the texts (or living matter) inside. The University buildings leading to and housing the Liddle Collection evoke such a sense of institutional guardianship and shelter, not only in the capacity to safeguard, but also in the authority to interpret. This constitutes 'a privileged *topology*' (Derrida 1995: 10, original emphasis).

The diagrams are a means of charting different levels of structure. Spieker refers to the 'substratum' of the archive (2008: 9) and Derrida to its 'substrate' (1995: 10). This implies an underlying framework that organizes, classifies, groups and differentiates, such as an archive hierarchy or a set of shelving units. However, the term 'substrate', when used in marine biology refers to the deposits of gravel, rocks and sand that make up the ocean floor. Here again, Farge's metaphor is called to mind in imagining the residue of the World War I

as another substrate, or a submerged pitted terrain, dimly perceived beneath the layers of archival structures and their deposits of texts and images.

### **3. *Writing lists***

Third, as I read the files, sequences of words suggest themselves to me based on similarity of sounds or on associated meanings: shell, shelf, shelter, self, salve, salvage, save, serve, service, survey, sever, severe, persevere, preserve – – seep, bleed, blood, mud, soil, spoil – recoil, retreat, rebound, redoubt. Written as lists, they look like indices, but they point nowhere. Whereas alphabetical listings have spacing and order (from ‘a’ to ‘b’ for example), here there is slippage and overlap produced by the phonetics of alliteration and assonance. As chains of words, they could appear to be a form of Dadaist poetry but there is no element of chance. Neither poetic nor purposeful, they are idiosyncratic listings taking inspiration from archival forms. They help me to process the Collection by theme, using a logic of word association.

### **Distracting the archive**

The three writing/drawing methods I have outlined above could be correlated obliquely to the catalogue and indices as modes of approaching and studying the archive. First, operating at the level of individual files at the base of the catalogue hierarchy, is the time consuming process of note making and copying. Second, at the higher topological level is the practice of diagramming; and third, at the thematic level is the writing of lists. Although these methods have artistic aspects they remain as entry points, before the stage of experimentation.

Alongside these strategies, I have also been drawing, in a conventional sense, from photographs and museum objects, but in both writing and drawing there has so far been an air of restraint.

In her lecture 'Worlding: From the Archive to Compost' (2014) the art director of 'dOCUMENTA (13)', Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev describes archiving as a compartmentalizing discourse and contrasts it with the potential of art practice to mix things up, a process she calls 'composting'. In contrast to the fluidity implied by Farge's ocean analogy, Christov-Bakargiev presents the archive as an arctic waste or a deep freeze in which historical material is held in stasis: 'To distinguish between the archive and compost is to distinguish between inertia and live organism, between rationalistic classifications and procedural imaginative associations' (Christov-Bakargiev 2014). Within an archive's system of categories, items may be excluded or rendered inaccessible and effectively repressed (here she draws on both Michel Foucault [1972] and Derrida [1995]). There is no potential for contamination or cross-pollination between files. By contrast, 'composting' involves pulling things out of their discrete containers, drawing in material from disparate sources and putting things together to create a generative, fertile ground from which 'different stories can be told' (Christov-Bakargiev 2014).

As 'dOCUMENTA (13)' demonstrated, composting can mean inserting museum objects next to contemporary artworks, situating scientific experiments in art galleries, and bringing biological, ecological and ethological questions into discussions of art. More radically still, it can go beyond the mixing of disciplinary perspectives towards the mingling of species, positioning nonhuman animals, not only as co-creators in human art projects but as actors, authors and agents in their own creative projects. Here she calls on Donna Haraway's (2012) concept of 'worlding' as a process of actively re-imagining a non-anthropocentric world.

Given my experience of the richness of the Liddle Collection, I have to take issue with Christov-Bakargiev's picture of archives as intrinsically rationalistic and frozen. The requirement to conserve will always necessitate storage in a space that is set apart, with

systems to manage access. However, I take her job description for the artist seriously (even if that means paying attention to the lice). Christov-Bakargiev does not underestimate the potential for artworks to draw on and take inspiration from archival material but she implies that this should be done critically. In another lecture, she uses the term ‘the distracted archive’ to explain how knowledge can be pulled out of its disciplinary containers (2013). ‘Distracted’ here is from the Latin *distrahere* meaning to be drawn out in another direction.

‘DOCUMENTA (13)’ contained many examples of works which reached into the archives to bring out something strange and challenging. For example, Kader Attia’s *The Repair from Occident to Extra-Occidental Cultures* (2012) demonstrated the theory of ‘composting’ within a single installation. In this artwork, Attia juxtaposed images of men injured in World War I, severely disfigured and radically refigured by facial reconstructive surgery, with African masks and sculptures that also showed conspicuous signs of repair. The array of gouged and protruding features created a disturbing sense of underlying structural rift and violent rupture, things being wrenched apart then having to be sewn back together. The destructive outcomes of warfare and the skillfully improvised surgical repairs were put next to the crafting and refashioning of broken artefacts, to bring the issue of repair to the fore as manifest in both colonizing and colonized cultures (Attia 2015). To further add to the mix, books on varied topics including anthropology and surgery were bolted to shelving units, and re-purposed World War I objects were displayed in vitrines. Such a sitting of historical items from disparate sources in the same space sets up a dynamic in which objects and images infect each other, resisting easy classification or comfortable viewing. As a method of working it is in some ways an expansion of the collaging techniques developed by artists during and after World War I, such as Kurt Schwitters and Hannah Höch. However, Attia’s work is not an attempt to decontextualize his material or assert a complete break with the past. There are examples of modernist works that seem to prefigure his installation, such as Max

Pechstein's primitivist woodcut of an injured soldier's face, *Verwundeter* (1919). Attia uses the cuts and contrasts of collaging to reposition objects and documents, and draw out different historical connections and discursive formations – 'distracting' the archive rather than severing it completely.

It seems that archives can be conceptualized using a variety of metaphors: Farge's ocean, Spieker's physiognomy or terrain, Derrida's house, and the cold storage implied by Christov-Bakargiev (in contrast to the organic rhetoric of compost). All of these figures are useful in thinking about aspects of the Liddle Collection: its scale, its features, its site and its conservational functions. All of them imply some potential for retrieval, reactivation or encounter with traces of the past (or pasts), albeit experienced as part of an archival structure. In confronting the Collection I have added my own analogies, initially the burial ground and then the hospital ward. This latter seems particularly apt in identifying the limitations of my strategies so far. In the methods outlined here, I have kept my work within the orderly atmosphere of the reading room, using clean paper. I have observed the ethos of the sanatorium, and have not yet drawn anything out beyond its walls or allowed other materials to enter into my practice. The challenge for the next stage of the residency is to leave the safety of the conservational space, take the work I have produced so far, and expose it to contamination from the outside.

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Liberation of specific Belgian, French and Italian towns

Lice and delousing

Live and let Live relationship

Listening Posts

Loos, Battle of September 25 1915

Love Letters/Loving family relationships

Luck

Ypres, Battle of April 9 1918

~~Booby~~

Machine Guns

Malta

Manoeuvres

Map Reading and Map Making

March 1918 retreat and retreat of subsequent months

Marching up to the line/route marches

Marne, Battle of September 7-10 1914

MASCOTS  
MAXSE General Sir Ivor

Medical Science

Meteorology

**Figure 1:** Extract from Liddle Collection First World War General Aspects index

LIDDLE/WW1/GA. Reproduced with permission of Special Collections, Leeds University

Library.

LICE & DELOUSING

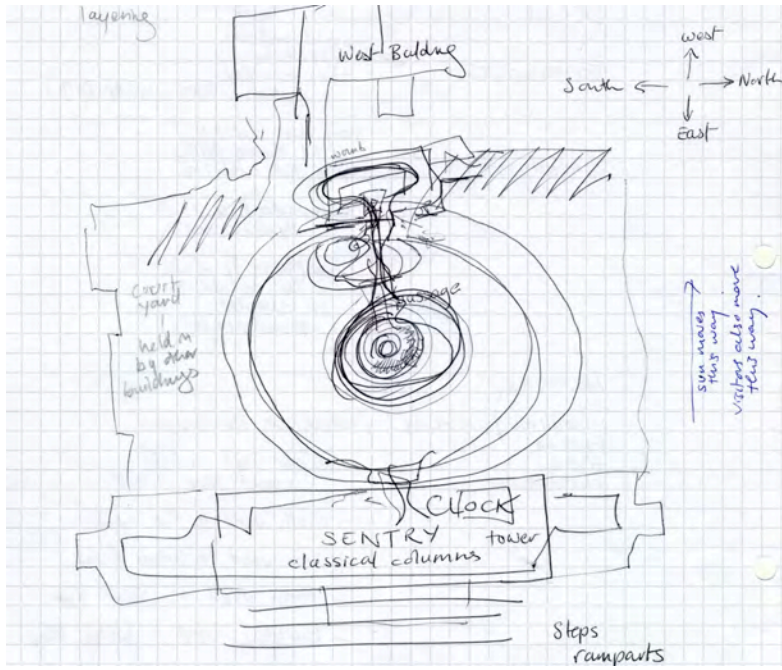
Refs cont.

- 34: J.Beard (W/F Recoll.) P17 for delousing.
- 35: W.Burton (W/F Recoll.)
- 36: W.G.Comper (GS) Certificate dated 26.6.17 - "free from lice and scabies".
- 37: M.Robinson (GS) Transcript of diary, p33(14.3.17) "Discovered that I was 'chatty' again ... how soon shall I be able to get rid of the beasts ...".
- 38: J.Paling (GS) Typescript recollections, pp45/46 for description of 'chatting', effectiveness of Keatings powder (spills whole tin on his clothes) and "lice were carriers of Trench fever or PVD".
- 39: E.A.Packe (GS) Letter 21-27.12.14. "One of our chaps stripped to the waist and stamping on his shirt saying "Die you ... lice. Die! you ... lice".
- 40 D J.B. Wilson (G.S.). Memoirs p 64. Details of infection & attempt to combat it. p 86. De-lousing station. Relation of the louse to trench fever.
- 41 R. Burns (G.S.). Recollus p 18 for method of removing horse fleas or lice from his belt.
- 42 G.B. Haujidge Maj (GS). M.I. Box 1. Page 184. Gallipoli "they were very hairy, no amount of washing clothes in the sea would get rid of them."
- 43 T. Wagstaffe Sgt (GS) letter, partly dated 16 W/F have a few white mice on our shirts so they keep us from getting a chill at night.
- 44 F.S. Varnham (Anzac, N.Z) Typescript of diary 25/12.15 on board ship between Madras and Alexandria. 26.8.17 a louse hunt in the trenches
- 45 J.A. Webster (G.S.). Many requests in letters 1916 for tins of Harrison's Pomade to kill lice.

**Figure 2:** Extract from Liddle Collection First World War General Aspects index

LIDDLE/WW1/GA. Reproduced with permission of Special Collections, Leeds University Library.





**Figure 5:** Diagram by the author.