BBC iWonder

Creating a picture of remembrance

[Helen Marshall]

When the BBC asked me to produce this artwork to mark the centenary, I was really pleased to be involved. I knew that this artwork would remember the past, whilst being grounded in the here and now. And I know the First World War touched the lives of millions of people and changed our world profoundly.

I knew I wanted the artwork to be a portrait of one of the many people caught up in the conflict – but I didn't know who it should be.

I really wanted a face that could feel modern, someone you could imagine bumping into on the street, so with the help of the Imperial War Museum archives, I looked through hundreds and hundreds of photographs of people who had played a part in the war.

So after much searching, we found our man- Private James Beaney, a 21 year old plumber's mate from Putney who became a Tommy in the Queen's Regiment. Just like thousands of others, Private Beaney had his photograph taken before setting off for battle in 1914.

But one hundred years on, who was alive to remember the people in these portraits? James Beaney's story is at risk of being forgotten and not only his story, but the hundreds of thousands of stories like it, of people who were a part of the first world war.

So we asked people to pose for their own portraits at the WW1 At Home tour, the BBC nationwide events running this year as part of the centenary. Our volunteers sat for their portrait in our recruitment offices up and down the country. We gave them a personal identification card with their photograph inside, the same way soldiers would have been given their ID cards before setting off to the war. By stepping into the shoes of those from the past, it would allow our participants to briefly encounter the lives of people from one hundred years ago.

The next challenge was to assemble the thousands and thousands of photographs we'd collected into the finished portrait. When we started placing the contemporary photos next to the historical photos, I did wonder what the final significance would be.

Seeing yourself next to someone from the past makes you realise: this could have been you. And even if you're not featured in the mosaic, you'll be able to spot someone who looks like you. Hopefully everyone can identify themselves in the artwork in some way.

One hundred years on, it's clear we're all still connected to the First World War. The story of Private James Beaney echoes the stories of millions of others caught up in The Great War. Their memory will continue to live on, thanks in part to the thousands of people who have made this artwork possible.

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