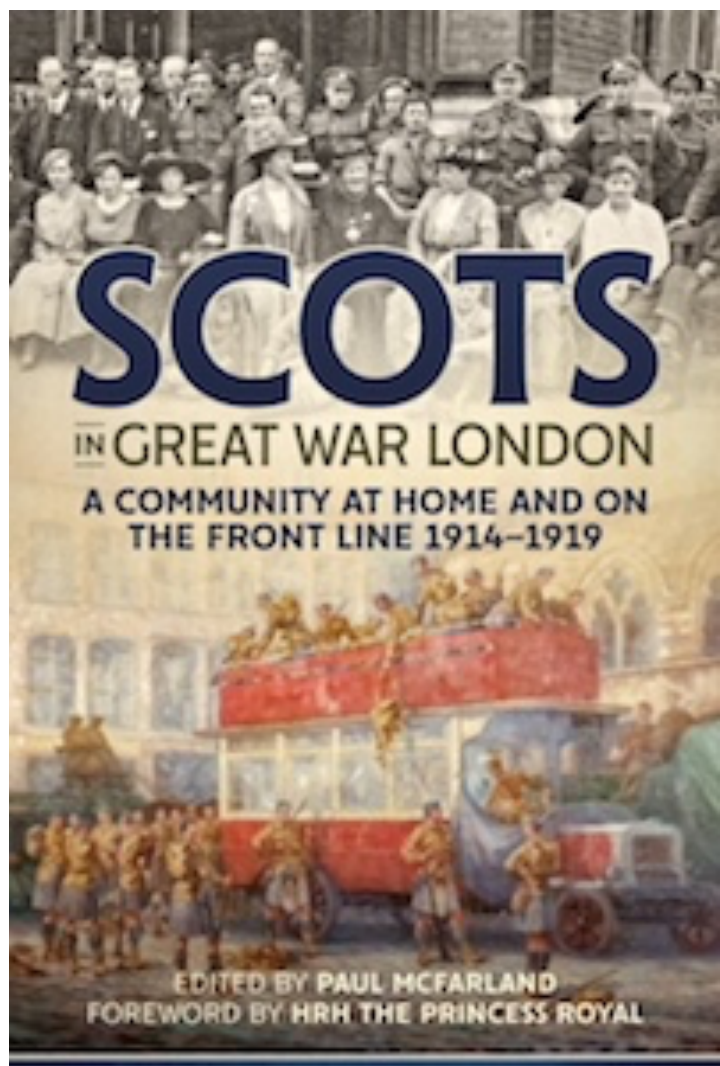


NEWS EXTRA - Scots in Great War London

“My first experience of the Church of Scotland was when Susan and I were married at Dumbarton Riverside Parish Church in 1986 and I have never looked back!”

BBC health editor Hugh Pym, born in Wiltshire, seems an unlikely advocate for the Church of Scotland, but his close personal involvement, with that of his wife, Susan, for eight years a member of the Church of Scotland’s



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Social Care Council, is undoubtedly honest and heartfelt.

Both Hugh and Susan are elders at St Columba's Church of Scotland in London, which has led him to be involved in a new book about the Scottish soldiers who passed through London on their way to and from the trenches of the First World War.



Susan was part of the Riverside congregation as a girl, and the family has deep links to the church - during Hugh's stint as Scotland Correspondent for ITN in the early 1990s they worshipped there, and their two sons were baptised there. But the life of a newsman is a busy one, and almost inevitably, a move to the big city of London is on the horizon, and so it was for Hugh and his family.

There, they went to St Columba's, and Hugh says they immediately felt at home. He became a church member in 1999 and was ordained as an elder in 2012; Susan had herself been ordained in 2002.

He says the book, [Scots in Great War London](#), came about because of the forces links of the current minister, the Rev Angus MacLeod. "Angus spent 16 years as a chaplain with the British Army. With 2018 bringing the centenary of the

Armistice and the end of hostilities in World War One, he was keen to ensure that the event was marked appropriately.

“He approached other Scottish organisations in London and the result is an exciting project which draws in our fellow Church of Scotland kirk in the capital, Crown Court, as well as other groups such as the Caledonian Club, London Scottish regiment and London Scottish FC (the rugby club),” explains Hugh.

“St Columba’s has an amazing story to tell from the World War One years and Susan and I have been privileged and humbled to be involved in the research around it. During those years St Columba’s provided hospitality to 50,000 Scottish troops passing through London. They would either be returning on leave from the trenches in France and Flanders or heading back to the Western Front after time spent at home.

“It started in 1915 when church elders realised that the troop trains from the ports arrived in the very early hours of a Sunday morning but Scottish soldiers would have to wait till that night for trains heading north of the border. Realising how frustrating and demoralising it must be for the soldiers to have to waste a day of their leave wandering the streets of London, a small group of St Columba’s folk went speculatively to Victoria Station very early on a Sunday morning. They approached men in kilts alighting from the leave train and invited them back for a wash and a bite to eat in the church hall. A few soldiers in mud stained kilts just out of the trenches accepted the invitation. And so began the programme which became known as ‘Soldiers on Furlough’.



**Hugh and Susan Pym at the CrossReach Awards in May.
Picture by Hugh Brown**

“In an astonishing effort led mainly by Mary Blackwood and women in the congregation, hundreds of troops were fed and entertained in the church hall at weekends. Sightseeing trips around London were organised, entertainment was laid on and psalms and hymns were sung around a piano. Long lost friends scattered among Scottish regiments would meet and sometimes brother would encounter brother after years apart. One soldier, asked how he knew about the work at St Columba’s, replied: ‘It is known about, up and down the line out there’.

“All the information about ‘Soldiers on Furlough’ has come from church magazines published in the wartime years. Remarkably they escaped the destruction of much of the church during a bombing raid in World War Two though the kirk session minutes and other records were lost.

“The magazines provide a rich seam of information for historians and will soon be digitized. I have thoroughly enjoyed reading them and learning so much about church life 100 years ago. It certainly helped that the minister at that time, the Rev Archibald Fleming [former editor of Life

and Work, and a pioneer of religious broadcasting], was a superb writer and it is uplifting and inspiring to read his magazine editorials and the text of his sermons.

“Stuart Steele, a longstanding elder at St Columba’s, was a very useful source. His mother Peggy Leonard served as one of the volunteers in the wartime hospitality team and can be seen in some of the photos of the work. Stuart told me his mother remembered writing letters for the soldiers to wives and girlfriends.”

Helping to produce the book has had to be squeezed in between Hugh’s other duties as Health Editor at BBC News – and with the NHS seldom out of the headlines, it’s a full-on job. But Hugh is only too pleased to be involved.

“If I sound like a World War One enthusiast (or even bore!) that’s probably because I am one! My grandfather, the Rev Tom Pym served as a chaplain in the trenches and his letters and a short biography written by my grandmother are moving to read. His experiences working with frontline troops under fire profoundly affected his view of the role of the church. He realised it had to reach out from its comfortable pre-war place in society. Working with other chaplains he pushed for reform of the Anglican church after the war though they found it hard to pursue their goals after returning home.

“My great aunt Dr Frances Ivens was a pioneering member of the Scottish Women’s Hospitals movement started by Dr Elsie Inglis in 1914. Offering their services to the British Army they were told to ‘go back home and sit still’.

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“Undeterred they offered their services to the French and Serbian authorities and were immediately commissioned to run hospitals close to the frontlines. I was pleased to take part in a service to make the centenary of the death of Elsie Inglis in November last year at St Giles’ Cathedral.

“I feel it is so important to remember the efforts and sacrifices of the Great War generation as the centenary of the Armistice approaches. It has been a privilege to be involved in the Scots in Great War London project.

“As well as the book there is a programme of events over the autumn including an evening of words and music at St Columba’s on Saturday, October 20.

“2018, then, has been a busy year. Working with Susan I helped with the ‘In Conversation’ strand of the Heart and Soul day at the General Assembly. We were pleased with the numbers who visited our programme of talks and discussions. This included publicising Scots in Great War London. I was also delighted to participate by giving out some of the awards and paying my respects to the people who do the incredible work that CrossReach do, in the annual Crossreach awards ceremony.

“I feel blessed to be part of all this and join others of faith to celebrate and publicise the work of the Church of Scotland in London and Scotland. Do come and say hello if you are ever at Pont Street in London on a Sunday. I promise you will get a warm welcome!”

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