

Leader column

Engaging with our city

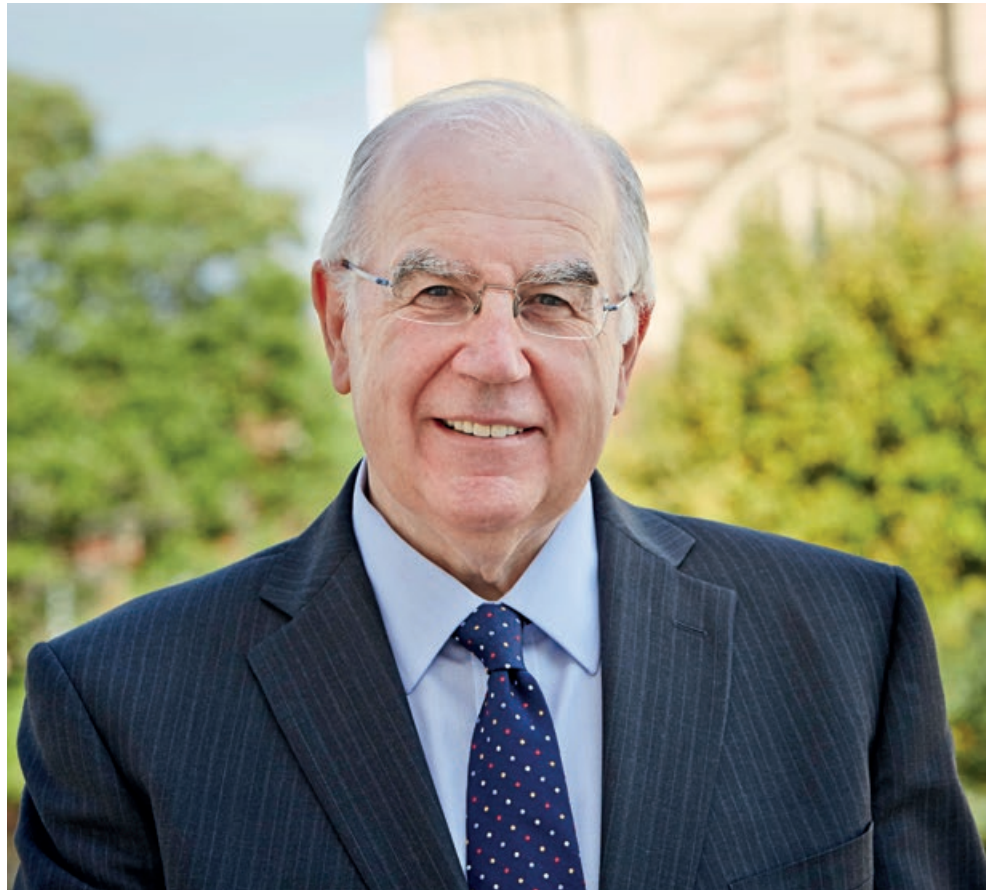
Such is the presence of the First World War in our collective consciousness that huge interest in the centenary of the conflict is already building, months before it officially begins.

The University's own four-year research project – Legacies of War – represents a massive programme of work, stretching across several faculties and schools; indeed every school within the Faculty of Arts has some involvement. As well as being inter-disciplinary, and involving undergraduate and postgraduate students and the full range of academic staff, 'Legacies' will engage with a wide range of people locally, nationally and internationally. Some strands of the work encompassed by the project draw on networks of scholars in the US and Europe but, in essence, it is rooted in the city of Leeds and its people.

Alison Fell, Professor in French Cultural History, and her team have done a brilliant job in building collaborations with the Imperial War Museum, the BBC, Leeds City Council and the University of Lille, Leeds' twin town in France. They have also won financial support from the Arts and Humanities Research Council, Heritage Lottery Fund, Higher Education Innovation Fund, White Rose Consortium and the Wellcome Trust.

Throughout the course of Legacies of War, our academics and students will work alongside local people, communities and organisations, to reflect on and discuss what happened during the Great War – as it was referred to at the time – and its profound consequences. During the next four years, colleagues will participate in and help to coordinate a huge series of events and activities across the city that will commemorate and explore different aspects of the First World War and examine its historical, cultural and social legacies.

Of course, our own involvement as a university will not go unexamined. A sample of records from 1915-16 of just over 100 staff, students and alumni show that our people served in many ways – from army chaplain to botanist, inspector of aeroplanes to army veterinary corps, interpreter to chauffeur with the Croix Rouge Français – and brought their expertise to explosives, gas, anthrax, textiles and



tackling human disease. More details of their involvement – and the contributions made by thousands of other citizens of Leeds – will be uncovered during the course of the Legacies project.

An especially poignant event for the University will take place later in the year, when the University's Brotherton War Memorial plaque will be re-dedicated. This is as a result of information gathered by community researcher David Stowe who, whilst working on the 'Leeds Stories of the Great War' project alongside our Professor Graeme Gooday, uncovered several missing names. Commensurate with the University's values, the names on the new plaque will be listed in alphabetical order, not rank. It will be an honour to attend the ceremony.

A striking and encouraging feature of the Legacies project is the extensive coverage it is already receiving in the local media. Features have appeared on local TV and radio, and both the Yorkshire Post and Yorkshire Evening Post are running a comprehensive series of in-depth articles as part of their on-going centenary coverage. Our academics and expert staff have formed close working relationships with the journalists involved; another example of how the University is building on its established ties with the city and region.

The Legacies of War project is emblematic of how the University can and should engage with the people, businesses and institutions of the city of Leeds and will, I hope, usher in an era of

even greater cooperation and partnership.

Leeds is a great city, sitting at the heart of the second largest metropolitan district in England. It has an impressive industrial and cultural heritage. It has areas of great dynamism where even against the background of a rapidly changing economic climate, there is a real sense of purpose, renewal and optimism. Like most western cities, there are also areas of poverty, exclusion and deprivation. The University has a responsibility to the whole city region, and we must do all that we can to promote and support its economic, social, cultural and environmental wellbeing.

We have a proud record of enterprise through innovation, collaboration and engagement with business and the third sector, we work closely with the NHS and we have strong cultural partnerships with Opera North, Leeds City Council and others, which enhance the student and academic experience and add value across the arts and cultural community.

As the University re-examines its strategy and extends its international reach, we must not forget our roots and our obligations to the city that hosted us well before the outbreak of the Great War.

Alan Langlands