

Blesma

The magazine for limbless and injured veterans | Winter 2022

PLUS:

WEST HAM UTD GIVE
BLESMA TOP BILLING

ACTIVITIES IN 2023

BELFAST TATTOO

BEHIND THE SCENES
AT BLESMA'S 90TH

**NEW-LOOK
BULLETIN INSIDE**



"I was told I
wouldn't walk
again but I just
wasn't prepared
to accept that"

UNBREAKABLE

FRAN TOWNEND WASN'T EXPECTED TO SURVIVE WHEN SHE
WAS HIT BY A CAR TRANSPORTER. NOW SHE'S AN ELITE ATHLETE

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How Fran Townend went
from fighting for survival
to fighting for gold medals

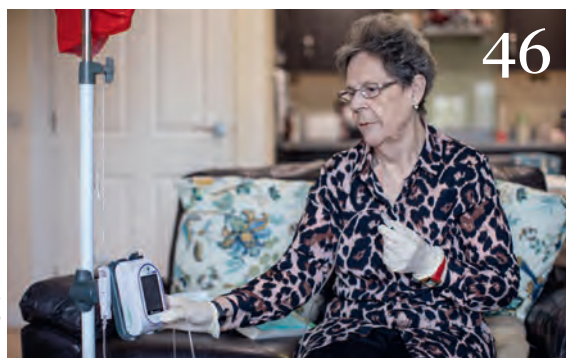


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Words: Jessica Mackinnon Photography: Andy Bate, Shutterstock

More than 1,700 Members have taken up the offer of a hardship grant

Hardship grant offered to every Member to help with living costs

AS WINTER APPROACHES AND THE EFFECTS OF THE COST-OF-LIVING CRISIS BEGIN TO DEEPEN, THE ASSOCIATION OFFERS FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE TO EVERY SINGLE MEMBER

Blesma has supported its Members and their families with more than £300,000 in hardship grants over the last few months as it honours its pledge to help veterans and Widows through the cost-of-living crisis.

In July, Blesma wrote to all its Members explaining the Trustees' decision to offer every one of them a one-off payment of £200 to tackle the rising prices of inflation, food, energy bills and other living costs.

Currently, more than 1,900 Members – more than two-thirds of the entire membership – have responded to the invitation, with just over 1,700 accepting the grant that aims to help them with ongoing hardships and unexpected expenditures through this period of uncertainty.

However, not everyone has decided to take advantage of the grant. Some Members got in touch to say that they didn't feel they needed the extra support but praised the Association

One message simply read: "Thank you so much for the £200 you put in the bank for me. This will help me so much"

for its actions. Those who have accepted the grant are able to use the money how they see fit.

Ex-Fusilier Kenneth Nelson, 70, from Hertfordshire, is one of those who responded.

"It takes away a lot of stress and is very useful," he said. "I have been travelling to hospital a lot recently and, with fuel costs rising, having Blesma help out instead of going cap in hand will make a big difference. The Association has been inundated

Welcome



with messages of support through cards, letters and phone calls.

“I wanted to say how grateful my husband and I were to receive the hardship grant,” wrote one Member. “This will help towards this year’s fuel increase. My husband has a number of health conditions aside from his amputation, one of which is neuropathy and muscle wasting in his hands when cold, so we always have a heavy fuel bill.”

Another Member, who wishes to remain anonymous, wrote: “I would like to thank everyone at Blesma for the gift of £200. I will be using this money to give my car an MOT and service as I am waiting for hip replacement surgery which has already been postponed due to

other issues with my legs. My car is my lifeline and without it I would be virtually housebound. I cannot thank you enough and wish everyone at Blesma the very best.”

Another simply wrote: “Thank you so much for the £200 you put in the bank for me. This will help me so much.”

When some 1,000 Members didn’t respond to the first letter that was sent out offering the grant, the Association followed it up with a second letter in late October to prompt those who may have overlooked the initial correspondence.

The deadline for submissions passed as this issue of the magazine was going to press.

“I WANTED TO SAY HOW GRATEFUL MY HUSBAND AND I WERE TO RECEIVE THE HARDSHIP GRANT. THIS WILL HELP TOWARDS THIS YEAR’S FUEL INCREASE”



Welcome to the winter issue. After an ‘eventful’ year of energy insecurity, rising inflation and industrial action we consider Blesma’s response to the current economic challenges.

There is advice on the Government’s cost-of-living payments and energy support schemes, as well a report on our own hardship grant (left). It is essential that we continue to expand our fundraising efforts and make the best use of every pound that is donated in support of our Members.

We are very grateful to the 400-plus Members who took the time to respond to the survey that was included in the last issue. As I write, the board is examining the initial results and NfP Research is arranging follow-up interviews with a representative sample of those who agreed to take part. It is clear that the majority of respondents felt that Blesma plays an important part in their lives, and that the Association needs to include a broad range of support, comradeship and activity in its future strategy.

In this issue there are some outstanding fundraising efforts, a celebration of our 90th anniversary and some excellent examples of how Members have fought through adversity. We reflect on a special day with West Ham FC and hear how Lexi Chambers secured two world records.

Finally, please do look at the wide range of activities that Blesma has planned for 2023 – and get your name down!

Wishing all our Members and their families a happy Christmas and peaceful New Year.

Jon Bryant
Chief Executive





Three years after the last visit, Blesma returns to Shetland

Shetland has stunning scenery for snappers

Back in June 2019, Shetland resident and Blesma Member Kev Bryant and his wife Cheryl organised a week-long photography event during which a group of Blesma photographers visited Shetland. Plans to repeat the trip in 2020 and 2021 were unable to go ahead due to Covid restrictions, but after a three-year hiatus seven Members arrived on Shetland once again in July to spend a week visiting parts of the islands and photographing the stunning scenery and wildlife.

The week proved challenging, not just because of the weather but also when it came to making sure there was something for everyone; some were interested in land and seascapes while others wanted to photograph the wildlife. There was also the need for locations that would be accessible to those with limited mobility.

On the first day – Sunday 24 July – the heavens opened and the whole day looked like it could be a total washout. With a quick change of plan, the group braved

the weather and headed to Tingwall and Scalloway. A trip to Burra followed with a decision to visit the Outpost, a sort of bar-come-farm run by Tasmanian expat Dave Kok where the drinks are free. Despite the rain, owners Dave and Gemma were on hand to allow the group to meet the wildlife and sample some home brew. With the appearance of patches of blue sky the group took a quick trip to Sumburgh Head to see the puffins. They weren't disappointed as the birds were out in their hundreds.

"I never dreamed that I would ever visit Shetland!" said Coral Mackenzie. "However, Blesma made it possible and I will always remember my visit with awe because of the

amazingly varied scenery, flora and fauna."

The next day the photographers headed south accompanied by much improved weather, this time to visit St Ninian's Isle and the seal colony at Rerwick Beach.

"The Shetland Islands lived up to everything I expected; rich in wildlife with beautiful, rugged countryside and more," said Pete Siddons.

The Members didn't have time to rest, visiting Spiggie Beach, Quendale Mill and the Jarlshof with stops at Boddam and the fantastically named Fladdabister on the return journey. Tuesday was Northmavine to visit Mavis Grind, Esha Ness, Ronas Voe and then North Roe.

Thursday was the highlight of the trip for the entire group; a boat trip with Shetland Seabird Tours to the cliffs of Noss. The amazing encounter with gannets was accompanied by great commentary from the extremely knowledgeable Phil Harris, himself an Armed Forces veteran. In the evening, the group attended a function at Fort Charlotte which included informative and enthusiastic presentations from local photographers followed by a taste of Shetland music.

There was just time on the last day for a final visit to Sumburgh to see the puffins once more, with a bonus sighting of a basking shark feeding in the waters.

"It was a full-on photo tour of Shetland, with stunning views, diverse wildlife and friendly locals," said Gary McDonald of the trip. "As an above-knee amputee, the terrain was somewhat challenging, but I managed to cope with most of it and captured some wonderful images."

Terri Hunt agreed: "Everyone on the island gave us a true Shetland welcome, making time to stop and chat to us, to share their knowledge and recommend places to visit. Thank you for the kindness and hospitality given to us during our visit!"

Blesma is offering a range of photography activities for novices and those with more experience. Turn to p14 to find out more

"IT WAS A FULL-ON PHOTO TOUR OF SHETLAND, WITH STUNNING VIEWS, DIVERSE WILDLIFE AND FRIENDLY LOCALS"



Clockwise: Gannets feeding by Pete Siddons; sea view by Graham Pearson; photographing a replica Viking ship on Unst by Kev Bryant; puffin by Terri Hunt; Shetland Amenity Trust building by Ann Siddons



Words: Kev Bryant

↘ BLESMA BRIEFING

Heading in the right direction

AS THE WORLD BEGINS TO OPEN UP AFTER COVID, BSO (PROSTHETICS) IS ONCE AGAIN ABLE TO SPREAD THE WORD ABOUT BLESMA FAR AND WIDE



This year seems to have passed by quickly, perhaps due to an increase in my travel around the UK after the Covid restrictions of previous years. So far in 2022, I have carried out 22 visits to Limb Centres, all in England. BSOs Tom Hall and Steve Burton pick up much of the visiting and liaison work in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland for practical reasons. My visits were mostly to support individual Members at appointments to help sort out issues with their prostheses or at medical reviews or second opinion multi-disciplinary team meetings. Some were as a result of an invitation to deliver continuing professional development to clinical staff and to raise awareness of the Association and the support it provides to Members.

During the year, I have had contact with some 100 Members regarding their prostheses and other problems they have been facing. Some had issues getting an appointment in good time, others had issues with their prostheses. Where possible, I have worked to resolve issues directly with the Limb Centres, or by advising the Member prior to their next appointment. When necessary, I have attended appointments with the Member.

COVID'S CONTINUED LEGACY

Since a return to near normal access post Covid, I have seen an increase in waiting times between appointments at Limb Centres. Covid's legacy has led to some Limb Centres having reduced capacity in the fitting rooms, while individual trusts maintain some social distancing and this continues to have a knock-on effect. Many issues that might have been dealt with on-site as minor problems are now requiring more significant input and perhaps new components or sockets. This all takes time and increases the frustration of patients and staff. I am monitoring this and will do what I can to assist

individual Members. I also feed this information in to the individual centre managers, NHS commissioners and, where necessary, Armed Forces Health leads.

Working on activities such as the family glamping trip and Members' Weekend has given me the chance to see the benefits of good prosthetic provision, but it has also given me an insight when things aren't right. I use this as an opportunity to share the broader story of our collective membership when I attend conferences, training events for GPs, seminars or research groups. Having a wide but objective view helps me to put forward ideas for new research or to support or be involved in ongoing projects.

FINDING THE RIGHT BALANCE

The blended approach of virtual and in-person meetings has worked well, and it is nice to be back in a room with lots of people. Being able to dial into a virtual meeting or video call has meant that I have been able to represent Blesma and its Members in more ways than before. I regularly join the bi-monthly Veterans Trauma Network (VTN) clinical and holistic meetings, and I am part of the VTN Programme Board. I was invited to be part of the interview team that reviewed applications and subsequent interviews for, and appointing key roles in, the VTN as it has developed.

The Veterans Prosthetic Panel (VPP) has continued to operate and all the monthly meetings are now done remotely, meaning I can attend every one regardless of where I am (so long as I can connect my laptop and not be overheard or overlooked).

Use of video calling has also saved time and money as I am now able to regularly attend liaison forum meetings for Northern Ireland and Wales. There will always be times when it is important to be in the same



HAVING A WIDE VIEW HELPS ME OFFER IDEAS FOR NEW RESEARCH OR SUPPORT ONGOING PROJECTS



Find a passion and stick with it

Pete Siddons, 66, from Dorset, learned to turn wood 30 years ago and has been making walking sticks ever since; a pastime that has provided hours of calming, focused enjoyment.

“Years ago, whilst on a walk through the countryside, I found an antler and decided to make my first stick. My hobby just grew from there,” said the double amputee and former corporal, who volunteers on a local farm. “I’ve taught myself with the help of books, but it was trial and error at first. I started off making basic sticks using hazel with an antler on one end. I progressed to shepherds’ crooks, and then had a go at carving heads.

“I’ve never wanted to make a profit from the sticks because my hobby has provided many happy hours in my shed. I enjoy giving them to friends and seeing them being used and enjoyed – and I have gifted a couple to my Support Officer as he likes walking.”

As you can imagine, Pete’s home is decorated with some of the walking sticks he has made over the last three decades – he has 50 or so in his living room alone! But now, after three decades of enjoyment, Pete is unfortunately having to slow down his stick making.

“I’ve got osteoarthritis in both my hands, and have had two operations on my left hand. I’m starting to find that woodturning is becoming harder to do because you have to stand for quite a long time with the chisels, so I’ve all but given it up now. On a rainy day, you’ll still find me tinkering in the shed though!”



room as others, and finding the right balance is key and seems to be working well at the moment. At the end of November, for example, I delivered a training package to Veterans UK staff with BSO Steve Burton to highlight the work of the Association and the concerns or challenges our Members face when interacting with Veterans UK, as well as trying to build on areas where things have improved or are working well. This was carried out at Norcross with follow-up sessions planned for Veterans UK Welfare Workers working remotely.

I look forward to building on this year’s successes in 2023 with the NHS England Prosthetic Service Review and working to help deliver a service specification that improves the lives of our amputee Members. Blesma will also conduct further research to look at improving the lives of our Members with loss of use of limb, we will be communicating the lessons learned from our Caring and Coping 2 research study, and I will be working to enhance our understanding of the specific needs of our female Members and advocating for change where necessary.

Wishing you a merry christmas and festive period.

If you are experiencing problems with your prosthesis or provision of prosthetics, please get in touch with Brian, BSO (Prosthetics) at Blesma Chelmsford on 07796 715908 or at bsoprosthetics@blesma.org, or you can visit www.blesma.org

Brian (above right) has visited 22 Limb Centres in 2022 to educate staff about Blesma



WORKING ON ACTIVITIES GIVES ME THE CHANCE TO SEE THE BENEFITS, BUT IT ALSO GIVES ME AN INSIGHT WHEN THINGS AREN'T RIGHT



Midlands area celebrates Blesma's 90th at Arboretum

More than 50 Members and partners gathered at the National Memorial Arboretum in September to celebrate 90 years of the Association. The group, who were all from the Midlands area, first met for tea and coffee before attending a service of remembrance. They then split into two to explore the arboretum's Remembrance tribute areas; one group using the land train and the other setting off on foot.

After stopping for lunch, which included a 'Blesma 90' cake and entertainment from a singer, the group came back together to visit the Blesma garden, where they planted a David Austin English Rose to commemorate 90 years of the Association.

"It was important for us to recognise all the work that has taken place over the last nine decades," said Midlands' Support Officer Vanessa Lucas, who organised the event. "We are really privileged that we have such a fantastic venue within our area. The National Memorial Arboretum has that memorial aspect, and we have the Blesma

garden there. It was a fitting tribute to be able to mark the event by planting a rose."

This was Tony Herd's first Blesma event since becoming a Member in March.

"I thoroughly enjoyed my first day out with Blesma," he said. "We all gathered in the chapel for a Remembrance service and had a great lunch. Sitting down with other Members as they shared their experiences was the best part of my day; I found it truly humbling. The day inspired me to raise funds for Blesma. I am early on in my rehabilitation, and far from climbing or running, so I organised a penny rush. I set out to raise £250 by asking people for their penny jars, but I have raised £473 so far."

Blesma Widow Valerie Bailey added: "The event was very moving and well organised. When my husband Peter was alive, Blesma was a lifeline for him as the Association made him feel like he was back in the Forces. That same camaraderie made me feel welcome when I started attending events on my own."

A DOUBLE PODIUM FOR ASSOCIATION'S HOT-SHOT ARCHERS

TWO BLESMA MEMBERS SECURED podium finishes at the Perth and Kinross Disability Sport Archery Championships in August. Alan Izzard caught the archery bug after taking part in the 2018 Invictus Games trials, and within eight months he had started taking part in competitions against non-disabled archers. He won silver in this, his first competition since lockdown.

"It was a huge surprise to win silver as I haven't shot since last December," said the Royal Artillery veteran. "I thought I'd just enjoy the day and use it as a way to get back into shooting, but before I knew it, I was shooting for the gold medal.

"Archery helps with my concentration and keeps me calm. I've got to concentrate a lot and that repetition is good for me. It centres me and helps me on my journey to recovery and with my PTSD. My next goal is to compete at the Invictus Games and represent my country once again."

Also competing was Royal Navy veteran Stu Padley, who shoots using his teeth due to the loss of use in his right arm.

"It was good to get more competition experience. I had a mechanical malfunction with the bow which cost me some points, but that's all part of the learning process. It was great to win another medal," said Stu, who still managed to bag himself a bronze despite the problems with his bow.



Alan Izzard (right) with his silver medal



Home improvements make a huge difference to Austin

Housing adaptations funded by Blesma and several other charities mean RAF veteran Austin Gallagher can sleep in his bed and wash in comfort once more. After his right leg was amputated above the knee in 2019, 73-year-old Austin struggled to adapt to life with a prosthesis, and simple tasks became extremely difficult.

“I couldn’t get upstairs, so I slept on the settee for a year and half,” said the veteran from Liverpool. “I was in a lot of pain – it turned out that I had broken my back – so I ended up sleeping on the floor!”

The Association championed building an extension for a downstairs bedroom and wet room. The local council confirmed it

would fund the project in November 2021 alongside contributions from Blesma, the RAF Benevolent Fund and the Liverpool Merchants Guild.

“My Support Officer worked with the contractor appointed by the local authority to pay the charities’ contribution up front as a deposit,” said Austin. “Blesma did everything possible to hurry the extension along and it was finally finished in May.

“It’s brilliant. The bedroom has been designed perfectly, with little things like the sockets being at a higher level. The wet room is big and has a seat for the shower so I can take the wheelchair in there. It’s everything a disabled person could want!”

COMPANY ‘PUTTS’ ON A FANTASTIC FUNDRAISER

A CHARITY GOLF DAY ORGANISED BY Agility DGS (UK) has raised much-needed funds for Blesma. The fundraising event, held on 14 September at South Cerney Golf Course in Gloucestershire, was a great success, with 26 golfers taking part.

The company, which is a Ministry of Defence contractor that provides supply chain and logistic solutions, has been supporting Blesma for the last decade. This latest corporate golf day raised more than £6,500, bringing the company’s fundraising total since 2012 to more than £36,000.



NRS HEALTHCARE ‘HONOURED’ TO SUPPORT IN 2023

NRS HEALTHCARE IS THE LEADING provider of community equipment, technology enabled care, wheelchair services and clinical services in the UK. The company has recently announced a partnership with Blesma.

Announcing the partnership in November Eva Georgiou, Head of ESG and Engagements, said: “We are committed to improving people’s health and independence every day. Blesma’s mission speaks wholeheartedly of our own ambitions, and we are honoured to support such an amazing charity.

“NRS Healthcare will champion Blesma’s goals and values through collaborative projects, volunteering, fundraising and equipment donations. We are looking forward to a long and rewarding partnership.”



Speaking of the partnership, Blesma’s Corporate and Regional Fundraising Manager Chris Knight, said: “We are delighted to have secured this partnership with NRS Healthcare and are really looking forward to building a strong and mutually beneficial partnership with them.

“NRS Healthcare is committed to improving people’s health and independence. It’s an exciting, multi-layered partnership that will not only see their staff take part in fundraising and volunteering activities, but it will also see NRS Healthcare donate mobility equipment for our Members.”

Nick Richardson



Having joined the Royal Navy in the late 1980s, I picked up a serious ankle injury very early in training. There was little in the way of rehabilitation available at the time, and as a result I have lived with ankle pain ever since. As I got older this pain became more of a problem, and I was diagnosed with degenerative arthritis in my right ankle in 2007. This was made significantly worse in 2009 when I was injured again, this time shredding a ligament and permanently damaging a nerve in the left side of my pelvis.

Although I was able to get into the military rehabilitation system after this second injury, and subsequently have surgery to repair the ligament, it became clear that nothing could be done for the damage to the nerve. By 2011, I was experiencing significant levels of pain which had an increasingly detrimental effect on my life. My mobility was – and still is – poor and I struggled to manage the normal tasks of daily living. My levels of pain were becoming overwhelming, and even now are a daily challenge.

LIFE AFTER SERVICE

I was medically discharged in 2012; a process that I would describe as hideous. On reflection, I now see that I was very unwell at the time, and I found myself at a loss as to how to deal with the seemingly endless challenges that I faced.

Life was made even more difficult in early 2013, shortly after medical discharge, when I collapsed at home after developing a left-sided weakness and tremor brought on by the stress my body had been under. Life was suddenly very different; I was still overwhelmed by significant levels of pain and I could make no sense of my situation. It was only with the incredible support of my immediate family, significant help from Blesma and others, and the excellent treatment I was able to access at the Bath Centre for Pain Services that I was able to start to make sense of what had happened to me.

It was during the NHS Chronic Pain Management Programme in 2013 that I was given a diagnosis of

Chronic Neuropathic Pain, something that allowed me to better understand my condition and what this meant in the longer term. Essentially, my central nervous system is always on high alert, so my body reacts adversely to any painful stimuli; making even the most minor injuries far more painful than normal. This was a permanent change that could not be cured or controlled by medication, intervention or surgery.

I was also told that it was not unusual to see other seemingly strange symptoms in patients with chronic pain, so my tremor and left-sided weakness also needed to be managed in the long term.

It was only after completing the pain management programme that I began to understand my symptoms and realise that my chronic pain had to be managed holistically if I was ever to regain some quality of life. It has been a long journey. My pain levels remain high and my mobility remains poor, and I now suffer from



I THINK CHRONIC PAIN HAS BEEN A HIDDEN ISSUE FOR VERY MANY VETERANS. OFTEN, THE HARDEST PART CAN BE ASKING FOR HELP

VETERAN SPECIFIC PAIN MANAGEMENT AND PAIN RESILIENCE COURSES

There are a number of organisations that provide specific pain management support to veterans. Several are listed below:

- THE KING EDWARD VII HOSPITAL, LONDON - CENTRE FOR VETERANS' HEALTH
www.kingedwardvii.co.uk/the-charity/veterans-pain-management-programme
- SUPPORTING WOUNDED VETERANS
www.supportingwoundedveterans.com/painresilience

For more information, help and support in dealing with pain please get in touch with your Support or Outreach Officer (their contact details can be found on p84). Alternatively, contact Brian Chenier, BSO (Prosthetics) at Blesma Chelmsford on 07796 715908 or at bsoprosthetics@blesma.org

analgesic migraines as a result of the medication I use. Nevertheless, I now know that if I pace activity and take steps to manage the pain and fatigue I am better able to do more of the things I enjoy. I will always have pain, and acceptance that it will never go away will always be difficult and distressing to manage. There are still too many days when I am overwhelmed by pain, tremor and fatigue, and I cannot remember my last pain-free day. However, an understanding of what I can do to regain some quality of life helps a great deal.

GIVING BACK AND HELPING OTHERS

A decade on from medical discharge, I now undertake some voluntary work in an attempt to give something back to the wider community. I was recently appointed to the Patient Voice Committee of the British Pain Society, a group that aims to support patients and carers by representing their views based on experience, and is influential in the design and delivery of care.

The committee recently commissioned a national survey that hopes to capture the experiences of patients as they access specialist pain management treatment. Once the results are known, this will help shape the way in which services might be delivered in future. I am an ambassador for Help for Heroes and am part of the Beneficiary Advisory Panel, a role that allows direct beneficiary/trustee contact. It is proving to be a fulfilling experience, and it is my hope that this work adds value, highlighting some of the specific challenges veterans face, while at the same time developing links into the wider community in an effort to get a better understanding of the challenges that come with chronic pain across all walks of life.

I have come to see that once you learn to manage your pain, there are opportunities to undertake fulfilling and meaningful activity. As I continue to move forward, I acknowledge that my condition does not get any better – if anything it is getting worse – but I prefer to be challenged and am now considering a return to paid work. I think that transparency and honesty will be key to success, and I expect that there will be issues to manage along the way.

If you struggle with chronic pain, I think the hardest part can often be asking for help. I never underestimate the moral courage it takes to recognise that you are in need of support, but there are organisations that can help with pain management. I do think chronic pain has been a hidden issue for many veterans and there is no doubt that living with pain is very challenging.

I think it is far harder than anything I did while serving, and once I acknowledged this, life could become more fulfilling.

There are a number of support services available to veterans. For more information, or to talk to Nick about his experiences and recommendations, please get in touch with your BSO or Outreach Officer initially



Take advantage of these free Will writing services

Blesma has partnered with two Will writing services to enable you to write or amend your Will for free. Your Will is an important way of making sure that the people and causes you care about are looked after once you are no longer here. There is no pressure to remember Blesma in your Will, but if you choose to leave Blesma a gift, it is a great way to be part of the Association's future work and support injured veterans without spending a penny today. There are two options available:

GUARDIAN ANGEL

Write your Will online – the process takes 30 minutes. Your Will is then checked by the Guardian Angel team of solicitors before signing. Follow the link at the end of this story and use

code BLESMAFREE at the checkout to complete the process free of charge.

THE NATIONAL FREE WILLS NETWORK

Meet with a qualified solicitor in your local area who will help you write your Will. The partnership allows individuals and couples who are part of the Blesma family to have their Will(s) written or amended for free using qualified local solicitors.

You can find out more information on either service, or request a free guide from The National Free Wills Network by visiting www.blesma.org/support-us/leave-a-legacy

To speak to someone at Blesma about either scheme, please contact the Fundraising Team on 020 8548 3517 or email legacies@blesma.org

Activities

FANCY LEARNING TO SAIL IN THE MEDITERRANEAN OR TAKE PHOTOGRAPHS ON SHETLAND? HOW ABOUT A SPOT OF LINO PRINTING OR FAMILY GLAMPING? BLESMA'S GOT 2023 SORTED

From fishing to photography, from cycling to watercolour painting, from York to New York, Blesma is giving Members the chance to try all sorts of activities this year. **Apply now by emailing eventsca@blesma.org, or calling 020 8548 7097. Please note: entry requirements may be subject to change.**

EASTER ACCESSIBLE GLAMPING WEEKEND

Location: Somerset

Date: 07-10 April

Application deadline: 15 January

Based at Wall Eden Farm, this accessible glamping site can be enjoyed by the whole family. Members will stay in accessible lodges that can sleep up to six and enjoy the beautiful surroundings as well as on-site activities like axe throwing and canoeing.

Who can apply?

Any Member with a family of between two and six people (i.e. the Member and up to five others). Please note: whilst there is no minimum age to apply some activities are restricted to an age limit.

BATTLEFIELD BIKE RIDE

Location: Ypres, Belgium

Date: 20-27 May



Application deadline: 15 February

A week-long cycling expedition to some of the famous battle sites of WWI, including a commemorative trip to The Somme.

Who can apply?

Any Member who has their own bike and can cycle 30 miles a day for five days.

Requirements:

Members must have six months' validity on their passport during the time of travel, be triple vaccinated, and own their own bike.

SPRING WIDOWS AND SENIORS WEEKS

Location: Sinah Warren, Hayling Island

Date: Widows Week 10-14 April

Seniors Week 01-05 May

Application deadline: 15 January

Based at one of the prestigious Warner hotels, the week focuses on relaxing and socialising, with gentle activities and sightseeing in and around Hayling Island.

Who can apply?

Seniors Weeks are open to Members and Widow(er)s over the age of 60.

Widows Weeks are for Widows only.

LINO PRINTING WORKSHOP

Location: Taunton, Somerset

Date: 09-11 May

Application deadline: 15 February

A Blesma Member will be running a weekend of lino printing in Taunton. This is a basic course for beginners or improvers, with all materials being provided. Lino printing is an ideal medium for Christmas and birthday cards; just bring along your imagination and any reference material you might want to work from.

Who can apply?

Any Member.

Watercolour Painting Course

Location: Somerset

Date: 04-08 September

Application deadline: 01 May

A five-day course for beginners and improvers. Members will have the chance to take part in studio-based photography and fieldwork in a number of outdoor locations. A great course for Members looking to take up a new hobby or improve their skills in a relaxed and sociable environment.

Who can apply?

Any Member. Equipment is supplied or you can bring your own. Experienced artists are welcome to hone their skills.





From France to the USA, chase the snow in 2023 with a Blesma winter sports activity

Apply now by emailing eventsca1@blesma.org or calling 020 8548 7097

Get your fix of winter sports adventures

WINTER SPORTS LA PLAGNE

Location: La Plagne, France

Date: 25 March - 02 April

Application deadline: 01 January

Working with adaptive ski instructors, this fully adaptive ski week will include everything from sit ski and stand-up ski, to snowboard and ski biking.

Who can apply?

This event is open to both beginners and advanced Members. Please note that carers are not normally allowed to ski.

Requirements:

You must have six months' validity on your passport at the time of travel, and you must be triple vaccinated.

COLORADO SKI SPECTACULAR

Location: Breckenridge, Colorado

Date: December (TBC)

Application deadline: 01 August

This annual event, organised by Disabled Sports USA, is one of the world's biggest and best ski spectacles for all adaptive winter sports. The perfect week to have fun on the slopes. Mono ski, snowboarding, stand-up ski and 3 track are all available.

Who can apply?

Most injury types can be catered for. However, hotel rooms are not adapted and you must be able to use a bath.

Requirements:

You must be able to enter the USA (ESTA), your passport must have at least six months' validity during the time of travel, and you must be triple vaccinated.



Activities

If you've not yet been to a Members' Weekend, make 2023 your year



Apply now by emailing eventsca@blesma.org or calling 020 8548 7097

Shetland Islands Photography

Location: Shetland Islands

Date: 30 June - 08 July

Application deadline: 15 March
An insider's view of photography on the Shetland Islands. Led by a Blesma Member, photographer and Shetland resident, Members will be given the opportunity to explore Shetland's rugged landscape and rich wildlife.

Who can apply?

Members must show evidence of photography experience and must have their own camera. Please note that wheelchair access is very limited.



FITNESS AND LIFESTYLE COURSE

Location: Fuerteventura, Spain

Date: 18-25 November

Application deadline: 01 August

A chance for a reset and a health change. Get moving together and experience all the magnificent beauty that Spain has to offer whilst trying out a host of new activities. Improve your diet and learn tips on how to balance your lifestyle. The week will have a possible variety of activities ranging from yoga, pilates and cycling, to paddleboarding, coasteering and golf.

Who can apply?

Any Member

Requirements:

You must have six months' validity on your passport at the time of travel, and you must be triple vaccinated.



The Members' Weekend and AGM

Location: Chesford Grange

Date: 24-25 June

Application deadline: 01 March

Meet up with old friends and make lots of new ones, find out what Blesma Members are up to, and have your say on what Blesma should be focusing on to support its Members. Save the date in your diary now! Blesma covers the cost of Ordinary and Associate Members, as well as their partners or carers.

Who can apply?

Members' Weekend is open to all Members and their partners or carers.



VETERANS GAMES AND CONFERENCE

Location: Israel

Date: 27 May - 02 June

Application deadline: 15 February

The Veterans Games and Conference is a five-day event based around a sports competition between wounded, sick and injured veterans from the UK and Israel. The sporting element will provide the focus for the event. The activities include swimming, indoor shooting (air powered) and a fully adaptive cross fit competition, but will be complemented by a full and varied social and cultural programme. A conference comprising of a series of roundtable discussions focused on veterans support will be held in conjunction with the Games.

Who can apply?

Open to any Member and their family. Sporting prowess is not the main focus but Members must be prepared to have a go. If you have attended previously (2019 or 2022) we will be unable to offer you a place at the time of writing. There are currently no vaccination requirements but this may be subject to change.

HANDCYCLE LONG WEEKEND

Location: South Wales

Date: 08-12 June

Application deadline: 01 March

This tour is for handcycles and recumbents only and is designed as a challenge. The tour will comprise three rides, with the distance increasing each day. It will run from Thursday evening until Monday morning. It's not just about the cycling – you will also be taking in the beautiful surrounding scenery of South Wales.

Who can apply?

Any Member with a handcycle or recumbent bike who is comfortable cycling 30-plus miles a day as well as being used to a reasonable amount of height gain.

BRAMPTON FAMILY GLAMPING

Location: Brampton, Cumbria

Date: 12-16 August

Application deadline: 01 May

The aim of the event is to engage with other Members and their families, making new friends and sharing existing friendships whilst being in the great outdoors. Spouses, partners, carers, children and grandchildren are all welcome.

Activities

Who can apply?

Any Member with a family of between two and five people (i.e. the Member and up to four others). Please note: the pods and surrounding areas are not wheelchair accessible. For wheelchair accessible glamping, please refer to the Accessible Glamping Weekend in Somerset.

DAVE LEWAN MEMORIAL FISHING MATCH

Location: Newcastle-under-Lyme

Date: August (TBC)

Application deadline: 01 May

Set in the beautiful Whitmore Estate in the heart of Staffordshire, the focus will be on relaxing, socialising, and taking part in a bit of friendly competition.

Who can apply? Both beginners and seasoned anglers alike are welcome.

COUPLES WEEKEND NORTH

Location: Manchester

Date: October (TBC)

Application deadline: 15 July

A new location for the Couples Weekend and a first in the Blesma calendar. Members will be able to enjoy the rich industrial heritage that Manchester has to offer. Manchester has been voted one of the 10 friendliest cities in the world, making it the perfect location for Members to socialise with one another and take part in activities around the city.

Who can apply?

Any Member

GREEK REGATTA

Location: Greece

Date: 16-23 September

Application deadline: 01 June

This is a chance to learn to sail in the Mediterranean. Beginners will be able to gain the first level of a yachting qualification, while those with more experience can simply enjoy lots of great sailing.

Who can apply?

The boat is not wheelchair accessible, and Members must be able to move around, with minimal assistance, on a 40ft non-adapted boat. Members must state if they cannot swim in their application.

Requirements:

You must have six months' validity on your passport at the time of travel, and you must be triple vaccinated.



EGX London

Location: Excel Centre, London

Date: 12 October

Application deadline: 01 July

Blesma is offering Members the opportunity to attend the EGX video game convention at the Excel Centre in London. EGX is the UK's premier video games show and is a celebration of all things gaming. This will be a day event and may also include gaming on the day.

Who can apply? Any Member



Remembrance Weekend

Location: London

Date: 11-12 November

Application deadline: 15 July

The annual Blesma Remembrance Parade at the Cenotaph over Remembrance Weekend. One of the most poignant events in the Blesma calendar.

Who can apply?

Any Member.



Apply now by emailing
eventscal@blesma.org
or calling 020 8548 7097



DORSET FISHING COMPETITION

Location: Dorset

Date: 08-10 September

Application deadline: 01 June

Beginners and seasoned anglers alike are welcome to take part. The focus is on relaxing, socialising and taking part in a bit of friendly competition at Revels Fishery, which is a stillwater fishery located in Dorset. Most noted for carp/specimen, coarse and fly/game fishing, carp, roach and perch are amongst the key species on offer at the venue.

Who can apply?

Any Member, regardless of experience.

RIDE TO THE WALL

Location: Burton upon Trent

Date: 07 October

Application deadline: 01 July

Join the Blesma crew on the annual

Activities

poignant and meaningful ride in memory of the fallen. The ride finishes at the National Memorial Arboretum.

Who can apply?

Any Member with their own motorcycle.

AUTUMN ACCESSIBLE GLAMPING WEEKEND

Location: Somerset

Date: 20-23 October

Application deadline: 01 July

Based at Wall Eden Farm, this accessible glamping site can be enjoyed by the whole family. Members will stay in accessible lodges that can sleep up to six and enjoy the beautiful surroundings as well as on-site activities from axe throwing to canoeing.

Who can apply?

Any Member with a family of between two and six people (i.e. the Member and up to five others). Please note: whilst there is no minimum age to apply some activities are restricted to an age limit.

SOLDIER RIDE UK

Location: TBC

Date: 15-22 July

Application deadline: 15 April

A chance for Members to enjoy a week's cycling through beautiful English countryside with handpicked routes, enjoying the company and camaraderie of other Members.

Who can apply?

Anyone with a bike.

SOLDIER RIDE NYC

Location: New York

Date: 10-17 July

Application deadline: 01 April

A prestigious event in the cycling calendar and a privilege to be invited back year after year. Cycle around New York for three days with the Wounded Warrior Project finishing with a huge celebration. An absolute must for any keen cyclist.

Who can apply?

Anyone who can use some form of adaptive bike. These will be supplied by the Wounded Warrior Project. Please note: temperatures will be hot and you will be expected to cycle more than 70 miles in three days.

Requirements:

You must be able to enter the USA (ESTA), your passport must have at least six months' validity during the time of travel, and you must be triple vaccinated.



Golf North

Location: Forest Pines, Lincolnshire

Date: April (TBC)

Application deadline: 15 January

Members will enjoy three rounds of golf spread across three days at Forest Pines Hotel in north Lincolnshire. The hotel boasts a 27-hole championship course. Accommodation will be provided at the hotel and the golf matches will be friendly, making the event open to all.

Who can apply? Any Member with a set of golf clubs. Please state your golf handicap when you apply if you have one.

Golf Spain

Location: Spain

Date: September/October (TBC)

Application deadline: 01 July

Enjoy three rounds of golf in a stunning Spanish location. Golfers of all abilities are welcome but you must have a handicap.

Who can apply?

This is not suitable for wheelchair users.

Requirements:

Members must have EHIC or GHIC health insurance cards and must be triple vaccinated.



CHRISTMAS MARKETS COUPLES WEEKEND

Location: Cologne, Germany

Date: 01-04 December

Application deadline: 15 August

A weekend break to get into the Christmas spirit. A chance to enjoy the historic city of Cologne and its world-famous Christmas markets. Explore Angel Market, the oldest

Christmas market in Cologne. Soak up the festivities, relax with your partner and enjoy the company of other Blesma couples.

Who can apply?

Any Member

Requirements:

You must have six months' validity on your passport at the time of travel, and you must be triple vaccinated.

NRA ADAPTIVE SHOOTING

Location: Bisley, Surrey

Date: June (TBC)

Application deadline: 01 April

This competition is open to any disabled ex-Service personnel. A fantastic chance to re-live and redefine the skills learned during those fun days on the ranges!

Who can apply?

Any Member

Surf Week

Location: Cornwall

Date: 24-29 September

Application deadline: 01 June

Blesma is collaborating with Three Zero 12 for the third year running to bring Members a week centred on surfing and yoga to be held in the stunning coastal surroundings of Bude in Cornwall. There may also be the potential to try stand-up paddleboarding and coasteering.

Who can apply?

Anyone can apply but you must be physically fit and a confident swimmer in open water.



Apply now by emailing
eventsca@blesma.org
or calling 020 8548 7097



Discover the thrill of scuba diving

SCUBA DIVING TRY DIVES

Location: TBC

Date: February/March (TBC)

Application deadline: 15 January

Learn to dive with experienced dive instructors in the safety of dive pools whilst working towards your PADI qualifications.

Who can apply?

Available to all but subject to medical clearance.

DIVING LONG WEEKEND

Location: UK (TBC)

Date: July (TBC)

Application deadline: TBC

Brush up on your diving skills with some of the UK's best diving. With tuition from experienced divers, the event will give Members an opportunity to get back in the water post-Covid and return to the social aspects of diving.

Who can apply?

Divers must hold relevant qualifications.

SCUBA DIVING EXPEDITION

Location: Egypt (TBC)

Date: October

Application deadline: 01 July

A great chance to enjoy some of the world's best scuba diving in warm water. You can dive for fun or work to pick up a number of diving qualifications. Instructors will take you through everything you need to know at a weekend training session in the UK prior to the trip. Complete novices are welcome, however, please note that you will have to attend and undertake the mandatory training.

Who can apply?

Anyone who can move up and down stairs on a 60ft dive boat with minimal assistance.

Requirements:

You must be able to enter Egypt, you must have six months' validity on your passport at the time of travel, and you must be triple vaccinated.



INTRODUCTION TO HORSEMANSHIP

Location: Cornwall

Date: May (TBC)

Application deadline: 15 March

An introduction to basic horsemanship and stable management in a safe environment. If you have no experience with horses or need some refresher training, two full days working with them and riding in Cornwall may be the event for you. You will spend three nights in self-catering accommodation with access to a swimming pool, sauna, and jacuzzi.

Who can apply?

Open to all levels and abilities. Please note: this event is unfortunately not suitable for wheelchair users.

AUTUMN WIDOWS AND SENIORS WEEKS

Location: Alvaston Hall, Cheshire

Date: Widows Week September (TBC)

Seniors Week September (TBC)

Application deadline: 01 June

Based at one of the prestigious Warner hotels, the week focuses on relaxing and socialising with gentle activities and sightseeing in and around Cheshire.

Who can apply?

Seniors Weeks are open to Members, spouses, and Widow(er)s over the age of 60. Widows Weeks are for Widows only.



SENIORS COUPLES CHRISTMAS

Location: Warners hotel (TBC)

Date: November/December (TBC)

Application deadline: 15 August

The first event of its kind for Blesma. Members over the age of 60 and their partners can enjoy a festive break at a Warner hotel, complete with carol singing, themed quizzes, cabaret, movies and panto.

Who can apply?

Any Member who is over the age of 60 with their spouse or partner.

ISLE OF MAN PHOTOGRAPHY

Location: Isle of Man

Date: 15-22 May

Application deadline: 15 February

A photography event for all Members. Explore the stunning scenery and landscapes of the Isle of Man and all it has to offer whilst taking pictures of wildlife, rural places and stunning coastlines

Who can apply?

Suitable for all. No photography experience or camera needed as Members can use their smartphones instead.

WOULD YOU LIKE TO PUT ON AN ACTIVITY?

If so, we'd love to hear from you! The Activities Team is available to give you as much support as you need in organising an activity and can explain exactly what you'll need to do. First, you will need to complete the Activities Proposal Application Form which is on the website, or you can contact aelocal@blesma.org

You will be able to discuss the things you'll need to consider about the activity and venue to ensure everything runs smoothly and that Members/Widows are able to enjoy themselves in a safe environment. Is the activity suitable for those with limited mobility? Is the venue accessible and wheelchair friendly? Are there accessible toilets?

Blesma will pay for the cost of hiring the venue, the activity itself, refreshments and, where appropriate, accommodation. Please get in touch with the Activities Team if you would like to learn more.



Busting the myths of Blesma Activities

THINK YOU KNOW HOW BLESMA ACTIVITIES WORK? THINK AGAIN. THERE'S A LOT THAT GOES ON BEHIND THE SCENES TO MAKE SURE EVERYTHING RUNS SMOOTHLY. WHY NOT JOIN IN?

The Activities Team always welcomes feedback from Members on the Activities Programme. Constructive comments in the past have suggested it may be helpful to explain what goes on behind the scenes. The hope is that this will reduce drop-out rates and increase the number of Members applying.

MYTH 1 I APPLY FOR ACTIVITIES, BUT I AM NEVER SELECTED

The activities selection process is carried out on a needs basis: those who will benefit the most from attending an activity will be given priority. This is done on the recommendation of the BSOs. Those Members who have not attended an activity before, or who have not attended that particular type of activity before, are considered next. Once the initial list is selected, all other applicants are put on the reserve list. Should someone drop out, the same process is applied to select someone from the reserve list.

MYTH 2 I AM ALWAYS ON THE RESERVE LIST

Being on the reserve list does not necessarily mean you will not get to attend the activity. In 2022, 40 per cent of people selected for an activity dropped out, meaning that almost half of attendees for all activities were selected from the reserve list. In 2022, 98 per cent of slots were filled despite the high drop-out rate. The remaining two per cent were mostly last-minute cancellations that were too late notice to fill.



MYTH 3 IT'S ALWAYS THE SAME FACES ON ACTIVITIES. ONLY CERTAIN MEMBERS ARE SELECTED

Currently, only 4.3 per cent of Members apply for activities.

If you are one of the 95.7 per cent who have not been on an activity before, perhaps because you have concerns about how you will cope or what to expect, please get in touch with either your BSO or the Activities Team directly on 020 8548 3519. They can advise on which activity might be suitable for you. With such a high drop-out rate, please be aware the finished result you see in the pictures has gone through numerous selections. With last minute drop-outs, there will be occasions when the place goes to those available rather than it staying empty.

KEY STATS OF 2022

- 40 per cent of those selected for an activity dropped out (this data is slightly biased, due to Covid and places being rolled over)
- 25 per cent of those who dropped out were new to Blesma activities
- 98 per cent of activities were filled

MYTH 4 I CAN'T AFFORD TO GO ON ACTIVITIES

Blesma activities are currently free to all Members – the only expense is in getting yourself to and from the initial meeting point. If funding your travel costs could be a problem, please speak to your BSO.

MYTH 5 WE ARE NOT GIVEN ENOUGH NOTICE IF WE ARE SELECTED

Currently, Members who are selected to take part in an activity are given three months' notice. If this notice period is increased, it is highly likely that the drop-out rate will also increase. If you are selected from the reserve list, your notification will depend on when the person whose place you are taking dropped out. This is why we ask Members to contact the Activities



Apply now by emailing eventsca@blesma.org or calling 020 8548 7097

Team as soon as they become aware that they will be no longer be able to attend an activity. That way, we have the best opportunity to offer the place to another Member.

MYTH 6
ACTIVITIES ARE NEVER IN MY AREA

We aim to go where activities will have the most applicants. All our Outreach Officers also oversee a programme of events in their local areas, and we are always happy to receive suggestions from Members who would like to consider leading an activity. The facilities and location of a venue must be considered based on Members' needs (for things like wet rooms, accessibility and terrain, for example) and so facilities are sometimes the priority over location.

MYTH 7
NOT ENOUGH ACTIVITIES ARE LED BY MEMBERS

Out of approximately 50 activities run in 2022, 22 were led by Members. We rely on Members wanting to volunteer to lead an activity, so if you are interested in getting involved in that capacity please do let us know! Please note that you will need to be qualified for some events. Blesma now has a policy to train and/or qualify those Members who are interested in leading events to make sure that the utmost support is given to those Members willing to lead.

MYTH 8
I'M NOT DESERVING OF ACTIVITIES

We do not discriminate. Activities are there for all Members and Widows to enjoy.

MYTH 9
ACTIVITIES AREN'T ACCESSIBLE ENOUGH FOR ME

We try to make our events as accessible as possible and our programme is designed to offer a range of opportunities to all Members. Where we have put a restriction on our events in terms of accessibility, it is always worth phoning us. We will always try to accommodate you. Failing that, if there is an activity you feel would suit your needs that isn't on our calendar, please get in touch.

CONCLUSION

We hope these facts will help Members understand they have a high chance of being selected for an activity, especially if they have not taken part in one before. If you are concerned about things such as mobility or accessibility, please give the Activities Team a call on the number above.



Words: Jessica Mackinnon Photography: The On Course Foundation

GB golfers level Simpson Cup series

This summer saw a successful season of golf for Members Mike Browne and David Ward. August also marked the tenth anniversary of the On Course Foundation's Simpson Cup which this year saw teams of 13 wounded, injured and sick veterans from Great Britain and the USA compete at Baltusrol Golf Club, New Jersey.

The Ryder Cup-style tournament featured four-ball matches on day one and singles matches on day two. Team GB ran out eventual winners, levelling the series between the two teams.

"We won 11.5 and 5.5, which was excellent," said Team GB's captain David Ward, who lost his right leg below the knee in the Kegworth air disaster in 1989. "Our team was made up of five rookies this year including Tom Nicoll who, despite not being happy with how he played on the first day, ended up beating a scratch golfer!"

David was Team GB's captain in the

inaugural Simpson Cup in 2012, when he led the team to a winning start. Since then, GB has never won on American soil – until he captained the team once again this year.

"The win was big for us because we lost founder John Simpson's son to cancer this year, so we were playing for Ben!" said David. Professional amputee golfer Mike



Mike Brown in action in the UK's win

Browne managed to take part in the event despite an incredibly busy season. In June, he claimed his first G4D Tour victory as he cruised to a four-shot win at the Horizon Irish Open.

"It was probably the best I've ever played," said Mike. "The weather wasn't great but that played into my hands. We had a seven-hour delay on the final day. It was a brute, but we got it done."

After two disappointing seasons, Mike has spent a lot of time working on his mental game and is finally seeing the hard work pay off, as he is now fifth in the world rankings for golfers with a disability.

"It's been a full-on year. I've worked on being in the moment because in the past, missing a shot would ruin my next few holes. I'm in a different frame of mind now. Winning the Irish Open put me in the Race to Dubai in November, and I've qualified for the Australian Open in December."



Lexi pushes her way into the Guinness Book of Records

Royal Signals veteran Lexi Chambers has pushed her way into the world record books, smashing existing world records in a half marathon as well as in the London Marathon.

Lexi became a full-time wheelchair user in 2019 following an elective amputation of her left leg below the knee. Just three years later she has become the fastest female to complete a half marathon using a non-sport wheelchair at a race in Bridgwater, beating the existing record by 18 minutes. Just four weeks later she took 28 minutes off the London Marathon record time, completing the full distance using a non-sport wheelchair in four hours and 32 minutes.

“I heard I’d broken the half marathon

record the day before the London Marathon, so I was on a real high,” said Lexi. “The full marathon was tough. You can feel every bump and hill in an everyday wheelchair, and the London Marathon is a hilly course! I could have been faster but for four hours I had to fight through a wall of people and water bottles!”

Altogether, 13 supporters took on the London Marathon in aid of Blesma, raising £33,271. Thank you to the Tri-Service team of Lana Smith, Adam Coates and Joanna Hobson, as well as Jordan Hunt, Andy Thrower, BFBS reporter Hayley Hammond, Nathan Stannard, Ryan Woodley-Mitchell, Natasha Green, Hollie Lovett, Boston Mwense and Benjamin Wiseman.

JAMIE COMPLETES SUB-THREE HOUR HALF MARATHON

FORMER BRITISH ARMY RESERVIST Jamie Hull took on the Royal Parks half marathon in October, raising £1,600 in aid of Blesma. Jamie, who suffered horrific third-degree burns over 63 per cent of his body in an aircraft fire in 2007, completed the 13.1-mile race in 2 hours and 58 minutes “wearing jeans and hiking boots, and carrying a backpack full of scrum!”

The 47 year old said: “I thought it would be the most comfortable way of doing it as I spend half my life tabbing around! My target was to do it in less than three hours, so I was delighted with my time. I used to complete full marathons in that time, but my injuries include partial loss of use of limb, and that has reduced my ability. But it was nice for me to get involved and raise a few quid for the charity.”

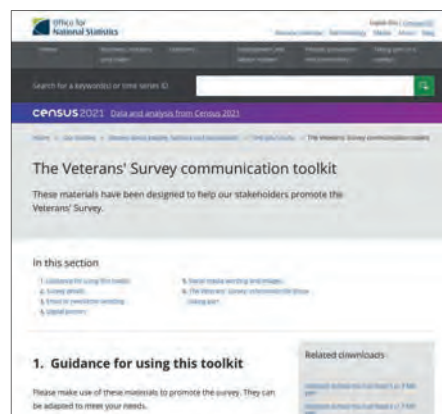
“The event was fun and took in the major landmarks of central London. There was a huge amount of support out there and it felt good to still be doing this kind of thing.”



Jamie Hull “delighted” with his time

HAVE YOUR SAY IN GOVERNMENT SURVEY

THE GOVERNMENT HAS LAUNCHED a UK-wide veterans’ survey; the first-ever exercise to collect feedback from the veteran community across the UK coordinated by the Office for Veterans’ Affairs and the Office for National Statistics. The online survey launched on 10 November and will be live for 12 weeks. It gives ex-Armed Forces personnel and their families the opportunity to feed back on their experiences, as well as access to, and use of, services for veterans.



Responses to the survey will help to better understand the experiences, needs and wellbeing of our veteran community, and guide future action.

It is important that as wide a range of views as possible are heard, and Blesma would like to encourage as many veterans and their families as possible to take part.

You can complete the veterans’ survey by visiting www.ons.gov.uk/surveys/informationforhouseholdsandindividuals/householdandindividualsurveys/theveteranssurveycommunicationtoolkit



Ted Hill recognised in special circumstances

Member Ted Hill was presented with this year's Hambro Award in special circumstances on Thursday 20 October. The award is usually given at the following year's Members' Weekend, however Ted received his award early after a devastating cancer diagnosis revealed he only had a few weeks to live.

"It was a very special afternoon, with both Ted's son Ed and his daughter Sarah attending," said BSO Midlands Vanessa Lucas. "Outreach Officer Sarah Payne made a fantastic effort to drive up from the South West with Members and Ted's friends, Mike and Coral, who both really appreciated the opportunity to say their goodbyes in person.

"Midlands Members Tom and Andy also attended, as well as Member Trustee Rich Gilbert, who presented Ted with his award and said some truly lovely and fitting words. Ted was really humbled and overwhelmed by the award," said Vanessa.

THE CITATION READS:

This Award recognises high achievers in any field having displayed exceptional commitment and dedication. It was established in memory of Blesma Member



Major J O Hambro MC, a former Chairman and Treasurer of Blesma, who served with the Coldstream Guards and lost a leg in Normandy in 1944.

This year, the award is given under exceptional circumstances in recognition of the extraordinary and unique contribution that Ted has made during the period of his membership.

Ted is an above-knee amputee who has been a Blesma Member since 2018. During this time, he has embodied the essence of what it is to be a Member and has fully embraced the fellowship and values of the Association in all he does to support others. From the outset, he has been a very active and visible Member. Ted has gone above and beyond to provide practical support to the charity, as well as advice, friendship and encouragement to other Members. When others have struggled, Ted has always been there for them as a constant source of support and inspiration.

Ted has been selfless and generous in giving up his time to become a digital volunteer, spending considerable time training and supporting other Members to engage with digital activities. In addition, he has provided immeasurable support to the Outreach programme during the long period of isolation caused by Covid. He also successfully completed Making Generation R and went on to tell his story to others, inspiring many along the way. Ted is especially known for innovatively creating his 'power cord people' after learning this skill during an online Blesma activity. He has taken this creative hobby forward and raised money for Blesma from the sale of power cords ever since.

Most of all, Ted has a special, gentle and engaging way about him that instantly puts others at ease. Despite his most recent challenges with his own health, Ted has continued to provide unwavering emotional and practical support. Ted's personal contribution to the charity, and in particular to its Members, has been truly inspirational. His positive energy and approach to life, irrespective of any challenge, have been truly humbling.

Ted is a thoroughly deserving recipient of the Hambro Award.

Ted sadly passed away on 29 October 2022, with his funeral being held on 18 November. He will be missed.



AGENCY PLEDGES ITS SUPPORT FOR TWO YEARS

BRACE CREATIVE AGENCY HAS made a two-year pledge to raise funds for Blesma. To get the partnership off to a flying start, the agency held a golf day at Brickhampton Court golf complex in June. Five Blesma Members took part in the event, which raised £7,000 for the Association.

Meanwhile, employee Hollie Lovett raised £1,600 by taking part in the



Scottish barefoot challenge certainly no walk in the park

A Lanarkshire fitness instructor and Army veteran has completed a 96-mile walk barefooted across the West Highland Way in aid of Blesma. Craig Curtis admitted the challenge was the hardest he had ever faced.

The seven-day event resulted in Craig having to use crutches for large sections of the route, despite having spent several months preparing his feet for what he knew would be tough terrain.

“After a couple of days my feet were getting ripped to shreds,” he told the *Daily Record* afterwards. “It’s the hardest thing I’ve ever done; I was on crutches for two days and my whole body just shut down. There’s absolutely no way I would do that again!”

Craig raised more than £7,350 for the Association, which was presented to Outreach Officer Scotland Emma Gratton and Members from Scotland at a veterans’ crafting hub in November.

BLESMA BENEFITS FROM THE PERFECT PICNIC

IN AUGUST, CHELMSFORD Rivermead Rotary Club raised £350 for the Association by hosting ‘The Perfect Picnic’. Hot weather, a bottomless jug of Pimm’s (or non-alcoholic punch) and a variety of raffle prizes brought in the crowds, with nearly everyone winning a prize.

“In 2019, our then-President asked me to try and find speakers for people with disabilities,” said Shirley Ann Hall. “I live near Blesma’s offices in Chelmsford and met BSO

(Prosthetics) Brian Chenier, who kindly came to give us a very interesting talk. Fast forward to 2022 and our new President, Julia Jeapes, chose Blesma as the Rotary Club’s charity of the year and invited a Blesma Member to speak about the various aids made available to him.”

As well as the raffle and refreshments, picnic goers were entertained by local soprano singer Lorraine Ely, and jazz musician Ollie Wyatt.



London Marathon. “We are in awe of the amount of work that Blesma does in going above and beyond to support limbless veterans and those who have lost the use of their limbs or their sight,” said managing director Nick Bracey.

“I am a veteran myself, having served for 10 years in the Duke of Edinburgh’s Royal Regiment, and am proud to support Blesma and the work it does to help ex-Service men and women.

“It was very moving to hear for ourselves the life experiences of some of Blesma’s beneficiaries at our annual golf day. Every interaction we have with the charity continues to drive us to plan more events over the next 12 months.”





IN PURSUIT OF A DREAM

WHEN FRAN TOWNEND WAS HIT BY A CAR TRANSPORTER IN 2013 SHE BROKE ALMOST EVERY BONE IN HER BODY. AT FIRST, SHE WASN'T EXPECTED TO LIVE, THEN SHE WASN'T EXPECTED TO WALK. NOW SHE'S A GB ATHLETE



Fran uses a supportive 'stock' saddle and adapted stirrups to give her more stability when playing

Hurling along at 30mph, Fran Townsend deftly tweaks the tension of the reins and her pony wheels to the left as the polo mallets arc through the air with menace. Bumped, buffeted and driven off course, she still manages to break free from the thrashing crowd to charge up-field in pursuit of the ball that is careering over the manicured grass.

At full throttle, the pony glides across the turf to elude rivals and, with three well-executed hits, the ball bounces through the coloured posts to register a crucial goal for Fran's team. It is another skilled piece of play in the energy-sapping summer heat from one of Britain's premier women polo players.

A sunny polo field in the heart of Sussex is a world away from the gloomy night when Fran, on the day of putting her application in to become an Army doctor, almost lost her life in a devastating road accident.

Stopping to put her medic's training into practice to help an injured motorist, she was hit by a truck whose driver failed to see her and her stricken patient. Fran, then just

weeks from sitting her final exams at the end of her medical degree, broke all her ribs, punctured both lungs, ruptured her aorta, right kidney and liver, broke her back in two places, her pelvis in three places, and suffered a severe head injury.

Fran's injuries were catastrophic; she was airlifted to hospital and her family were told to prepare for the worst. The doctors, who had to drill a hole in her skull to relieve the pressure, also considered amputating both legs below the knee.

"It was a miracle I was alive," says Fran. "I was told I would never walk again but I wasn't prepared to accept that." Eighteen months of rehabilitation at Headley Court were followed by a long road back to fitness.

"IT WAS A MIRACLE I WAS ALIVE. I WAS TOLD I WOULDN'T WALK AGAIN BUT I JUST WAS NOT PREPARED TO ACCEPT THAT"

This year, despite still suffering physical limitations from her injuries, she earned a place on the England women's polo team that won silver at the European Championships and bronze at the inaugural World Championships in Argentina.

Fran, who was funded by Blesma to pursue her dream of representing her country, credits her Army upbringing, family support and the assistance of military charities for her remarkable comeback.

"I am incredibly grateful to Blesma for believing in me and funding me for the World Championships. The Association believed it was a worthwhile investment and I hope my achievements will help others believe that they can follow their dreams and be independent," she says.

A DEMANDING AND VARIED CAREER

Fran was brought up in an Army family and lived in 16 houses in 16 years as her father rotated through postings with the Royal Artillery. She planned to follow him into service after completing officer training at university before passing out from RMA Sandhurst and joining the Regular Army.

"It was the natural thing for me to do. It is a great career that is demanding and varied,"



Fran can't feel anything on the outside of her right leg or below the knee. She also has weakness around her pelvis and in her left leg





Fran was part of the England team that won silver at the European Championships and bronze at the World Championships



she says. “The value the Army places in pushing you out of your comfort zone and into something that is not without risk was really appealing to me.”

That ethos came under incredible stress when, as a final year medical student, she was driving home from an Army Reserves Centre following a training evening.

“I was overtaken by a van, and as it drove off into the distance I saw dust illuminated by its tail lights,” says Fran. “I realised it had crashed so pulled onto the hard shoulder. I checked I was off the main carriageway, put my car in a fend-off position, grabbed my high-vis and ran to help.

“I almost stepped on the body of a young man. He was conscious and told me that he had been thrown through the windscreen. I began checking his airway, breathing and circulation, dialled 999, and was kneeling to take his pulse when I heard a loud crash. I thought someone had hit my car, and as I looked over my shoulder I saw a lorry’s headlights coming down the hard shoulder towards me. My immediate thought was that I didn’t have time to move the man I was treating. I knew we were going to be hit.

“I don’t remember the impact; which is fortunate because it means I don’t have to

relieve that moment. I do remember lying on my back, trapped underneath something, with the guy who I’d been helping lying on his front with his arm over my chest.

“I was incredibly short of breath, really struggling for air, and remember asking a police officer if they could move the guy’s arm because I thought that was restricting my chest. What had actually happened was that I had punctured my lungs and they were filling up with the blood that I was losing from my ruptured aorta.”

TOUCH AND GO

Emergency crews had to work for hours to get Fran and the van driver clear from the wreckage of the transporter that had hit them. She was then airlifted to hospital.

“I remember the smell of diesel and the flashing lights, then a doctor told me we had landed at hospital,” says Fran. “Just as we got there, my vital signs crashed and my blood pressure dropped like a stone. The major trauma team had to replace my circulating blood volume four times before they stabilised me.

“A police officer turned up at my mum’s house in the middle of the night to tell her I had been involved in an accident and that

they weren’t sure if I was going to survive. It upsets me; imagine being a parent and having to go through that. Every time the police radio crackled, my mum would turn to my sister wondering if they were too late. It was devastating emotionally for them. That really gets me – how dare someone put my family through that!”

Fran stayed in hospital for five months. Her life was put on hold after the accident as she couldn’t complete her university degree’s final exams, and her application to become an Army doctor stayed in a file on her adjutant’s desk. She was initially offered six weeks of physiotherapy on the NHS, but was then allocated a place at Headley Court, where she learned of Blesma.

“Progress was slow, but Headley was an incredible place. There was a really positive approach to helping you achieve your rehab goals,” says Fran. “They gave me time and help to achieve things. I went from standing for 30 seconds with minimal assistance, to walking five metres using the parallel bars. If I kept improving, they were happy to keep seeing me.

“There were small landmarks like being able to wiggle my toes and lift my foot. Pretty much a year to the day I was injured



I went from using a wheelchair to crutches. That was followed by losing one crutch, then swapping that for walking sticks. That took a long time, and I still need a stick today.”

FROM SKIING TO POLO

Fran, a keen sportswoman and horse rider before the accident, got a huge confidence boost from a Blesma skiing trip during her rehabilitation, having also tried wheelchair basketball, rugby, and tennis. She then joined a polo recovery programme led by Blesma Member Elaine Corner, a 25-year Army veteran who took up polo after losing her left leg below the knee after a motorbike accident in 2011.

“I loved it and it was great to be back on a horse again,” she says. “I joined the Combined Services Polo Club at Tidworth and just got stronger and better. My target was to play in a non-disabled team, but it was hard because some of my injuries haven’t healed.

“I can’t feel anything on the outside of my right leg or below the knee. One muscle works below the knee, so I can just about raise my foot. I’ve got weaknesses around my pelvis and in my hamstrings and adductor muscles, and I have a lot of nerve damage – I can’t run or jump, for example.”

Fran uses a supportive ‘stock’ saddle and adapted stirrups to give her more stability and proprioception (your body’s ability to sense movement and action) when playing. Her dedication to training and her drive to improve have seen her progress to play in – and against – non-disabled teams. She spends four months during the British winter on a polo farm in New Zealand, and her ever-advancing skills and determination have resulted in her receiving an invitation to the England non-disabled squad.

“When we turned up to the European Championships with me on crutches, people were saying: ‘What are England thinking?’ But we won the silver medal there and qualified for the first-ever ladies’ World

“I HOPE THAT WHAT I HAVE ACHIEVED WITH BLESMA’S HELP WILL INSPIRE OTHER MEMBERS TO BELIEVE IN THEMSELVES”

Championships where we came home with the bronze medal,” says Fran. “It makes me very emotional when I think about what I have been able to achieve with the help of so many people.”

HEADLEY, HELP AND HOPE

The physical scars from Fran’s accident remain, but she is now philosophical about the night when her life changed forever. The van driver suffered similarly devastating injuries, although the lorry driver was only fined £750 and given points on his licence.

“Being able to play polo and compete after what happened to me has given me confidence in myself and what I can do,” says Fran, who has gone on to pass her medical exams and is working in an NHS hospital where her responsibilities include A&E shifts. “I benefitted so much from the Headley Court experience where everyone was going through something similar and offered advice and encouragement. I hope what I’ve achieved with Blesma’s help will inspire others to believe in themselves.”

Blesma offers a comprehensive activities programme that caters for all levels and injuries. Find out more on p14





Words: Danny Buckland Photography: Andy Bate

Blesma celebrated its 90th anniversary in October at the impressive Royal Hospital Chelsea



Blesma
THE LIMBLESS VETERANS

1932 – 2022

NINE DECADES *of* DEDICATION

NINETY YEARS OF SUPPORTING LIMBLESS AND INJURED VETERANS IS SOMETHING TO SHOUT ABOUT. SO THE ASSOCIATION DID JUST THAT!

With a portrait of King Charles II gazing down from the oak-panelled walls, the State Apartments at the Royal Hospital Chelsea were a fitting venue to mark Blesma's 90th anniversary. The official reception on 26 October was attended by Members, supporters and donors, and served as a moment to celebrate both the Association's achievements and its resolve to uphold its principles for future generations.

Member helping Member has been a constant thread over the years as Blesma grew from local associations and groups formed after World War I into a national force that positioned itself at the leading edge of veterans' welfare. Blesma's Chairman General Sir Adrian Bradshaw told guests at the event that Blesma was 'a family' built on foundations of mutual support.

"The principles of the Association, right from the start, were that this is a membership organisation. It is for the Members and about the Members," he said.



The grounds of the Royal Hospital provided the ideal backdrop for the 90th celebrations

“It is the Members who we take our direction from.” He highlighted that the first limbless ex-servicemen’s groups began in 1918, when 40,000 limbless veterans returned from World War I to a society unprepared and ill-equipped to deal with the consequences of their service injuries.

The groups united into a national association in 1932, and today that association remains true to the spirit of the founding Members who believed that supporting each other in civilian life, just as they had in the ranks, was the most effective way of rebuilding lives and securing better conditions, rights and resources.

“The advice that passes from Member to Member at our Members’ Weekends and during our activities is incredibly valuable to people,” General Sir Adrian told the audience in his address. “We work on the principle that people will see lifelong support for injuries and losses that are life long. And not only them; the Blesma family is about the families of all Members as well. Everybody is a part of this. We work as a team.

“The support we provide is needs based, without favour to anybody in particular. If an injury requires a certain sort of support, it gets it wherever the person is from and however they got the injury. That is the principle upon which we work.”

Blesma has 2,700 Members, including widows and family members, who benefit from a range of support, resources and advocacy from the Association’s staff.

“IF AN INJURY NEEDS A CERTAIN SORT OF SUPPORT IT GETS IT, WHEREVER THE PERSON IS FROM AND HOWEVER THEY GOT THE INJURY”

General Adrian added that the Association is continuing to liaise with government departments and apply pressure when necessary to ensure limbless veterans are heard and that they receive support based on their needs. He thanked all individuals, organisations and trusts that support Blesma, saying: “It is hugely appreciated by Blesma and all our Members because without you we would not be in business.”

Member Cornelia Oosthuizen, a former Army officer, made her first visit to the Royal Hospital for the event. “I’m very happy and honoured to be here celebrating the 90th anniversary. It is an important landmark because of Blesma’s continuity, and it is a reminder of how long the Association has been looking after us and previous generations,” she said.





**Gam Gurung is a former
Royal Gurkha Rifle corporal**



**Shona Brownlee MBE
is a serving RAF corporal**



**Nik Eley served in the
Worcestershire and
Foresters Regiment**



**Cornelia Oosthuizen is
a former Army officer**



“Without you, we would not be in business,” Blesma Chairman General Sir Adrian Bradshaw told guests at the 90th event

“WE WORK ON THE PRINCIPLE THAT PEOPLE WILL SEE LIFELONG SUPPORT FOR INJURIES AND LOSSES THAT ARE LIFE LONG”

“The Association has evolved and adapted over the years and is always here for people and their families.”

Cornelia, who was medically discharged from the Army after a foot injury developed into Complex Regional Pain Syndrome before her right leg was amputated below the knee in 2016, has been supported by Blesma in her career as an international title-winning tennis player. She is now training to qualify for the 2024 Paralympics.

“It is fantastic to be associated with Blesma, and it is a real privilege to be at this event in a venue steeped in history,” said Cornelia, who has been a Member since 2018.

Former Royal Gurkha Rifle corporal Gam Gurung, who lost an arm in a training accident, added: “It is a proud moment for Members. Events like this bring us together and remind us about our shared history. It is great to meet Members here tonight and mark the anniversary. Blesma has always helped me, particularly after I finished my service and was settling with my

family in England. There was a lot of change in my life – it is very challenging for soldiers coming out of the Army into a completely different world. It is easy to feel lost, but that is where Blesma comes in.

“Blesma was there for me and I regard the Association’s Members as my family. We are all part of a big family!”

Shona Brownlee MBE, a serving RAF corporal who was injured in 2012 and subsequently had her right leg amputated, agrees: “The 90th is a significant milestone because Blesma is still active and doing so much good,” she said. “It helps so many people in so many different ways, and it is important that people recognise this and that the Association will continue to help Members. Their needs may change, but as long as there are needs I’m sure Blesma will be there for them.”

Member Nik Eley, who served in the Army, added: “This is about 90 years of Member supporting Member. We supported each other in our military careers and now we’re supporting each other after injury, and Blesma enables us to do that.

“The Association offers very important help on both the physical and psychological sides. I wouldn’t have got anywhere near where I am today without its support. Members of staff have helped me more than they realise.

“I think Blesma will go from strength to strength and be here for at least another 90 years because the membership will always support each other. You cannot take that away.”

Watch the Association’s commemorative 90th anniversary video at www.youtube.com/BLESMA1932



Centre: Blesma CEO Jon Bryant spends time with staff and guests at the 90th commemoration

Jon Bryant, Blesma Chief Executive

As the man leading Blesma into its tenth decade, it is Jon's job to look forward as well as celebrate the past

Why was it important to celebrate the Association's 90th anniversary?

Blesma has a proud history. It is unique as it was formed by mutual consent when people with limb loss got together because provision at the time was inadequate. There was no NHS and there was economic austerity after WWI so veterans were not well supported. They decided to do something about it together for the benefit of each other. That approach still guides us 90 years later. Blesma Branches came together in 1932 as a national association, which is what we are commemorating here.

How influential are the founding principles?

Blesma's core is Member supporting Member. None of us working for the Association can presume to have the expertise of our Members from their practical experience, which is why we consult them and why the majority of the Board are Members. It all stems from Member helping Member, and always will do.

What characterises that for you?

For me, one of the key benefits of Blesma is that as you recover from, or come to terms with, your injury you meet many others who have been through similar stressful circumstances and can demonstrate that they are still capable of things someone newly injured may not think possible. Having that person being able to wrap an arm around them and say: "This is not the end of

your life, this is a change in your life, and you can go on to do things you never thought you would' is fundamental.

What has changed over the 90 years?

The way the Association connects with its Members has changed over time, but the central aim of using first-hand experience has not. Of course, we can now sit at computers and talk face to face with someone on the other side of the world, but it does not replace Members being together, engaging with and helping each other.

What have been the landmarks of Blesma's life span?

There are so many, but an important part is what one generation does for the next: the limbless veterans of WWII benefitted from the efforts of Blesma's founders because it meant there was an association fighting for

"WE JUST GET ON WITH THE JOB, AS BLESMA ALWAYS HAS DONE, AND THAT IS CERTAINLY SOMETHING TO BE PROUD OF"



them and supporting them. Since 1945, we've been involved in significant and successful campaigning for group pensions, improved provision and better treatment. The service to injured veterans has improved. The Murrison Report and the White Report into levels of clinical care and provision were well received and were examples of speaking truth to power. Both had a positive impact. The way we campaign has changed and that is partly as a result of improved provisions along with the establishment of the Veterans' Agency and the Office of Veterans' Affairs, and a significant commitment from within the NHS to provide tailored support for veterans. We need to work with these agencies and that is where our advocacy has changed. Is it perfect? No. Will we keep pushing for better resources, treatment and provision? Absolutely yes!

How important are Members to decision making? The first thing to recognise is that Blesma Members are selfless. It is not about what they have, it's about making sure the right support gets to others in similar circumstances. Some of the issues affecting Members are debated passionately, which demonstrates their level of care and commitment. Their first-hand experiences are critical to what we do and how we shape our support. They influence what we do and

how we do it, which is another reason why it is so important to have Members with first-hand experience on the Board of Trustees.

What shape is Blesma in today and what are some of the challenges that you believe are ahead?

We are in a reasonably robust financial position and are effective at being responsive and flexible in delivering a personal service – face to face whenever possible – to Members. For an increasing number of organisations, the ability to speak to a fellow human being has been reduced, so we are proud that we deliver the majority of our support face to face or by speaking directly to a real person on the phone. Everyone is facing tough times. There is a war on mainland Europe and just when you think that

history has demonstrated that war is a thing of the past, you get a swift reminder that it isn't. We must retain our readiness to be able to provide support to people who are serving, or who have served, in the Armed Forces.

Our delivery is needs based; we don't differentiate how you were injured or what service you were in. As long as you have served and your injury or illness qualifies, we just get on with the job, as Blesma has always done. That is something to be proud of.

“Our delivery is needs based. We don't differentiate how you were injured or what service you were in,” says Jon of the Association's offer

Blesma

THE LIMBLESS VETERANS

1932 – 2022

“ALL I WANTED TO DO WAS TO SURVIVE TO BRING UP MY GIRLS”

BONNIE HARRISON HAS LIVED THE LAST FOUR AND A HALF DECADES WITH A HIDDEN DISABILITY AS A RESULT OF TREATMENT FOR CERVICAL CANCER. THIS IS HER STORY

For most Blesma Members, their disability is visible – bringing with it both positive and negative attention. For others, however, a ‘hidden disability’ creates a whole different set of issues. Bonnie Harrison, 79, knows that more than anyone. After developing cervical cancer when she was just 34 years old, she was treated with radiotherapy which resulted in severe intestinal issues. She has had to live her life ever since managing the condition, and it’s not been easy.

“Hidden disability can be very frustrating, and people often don’t understand what you are going through,” says Bonnie. “I have to be careful what I eat, I need to be close to a toilet, and sometimes I decline food, which people might take as being rude. Things like going on holiday, for example, take a lot of preparation. So I do





Words: Nick Moore Photography: Andy Bate

HIDDEN DISABILITY



Bonnie is unable to absorb any nutrients from food, so she uses a drip that is inserted (usually overnight) into the central vein in her shoulder



“HIDDEN DISABILITY CAN BE VERY FRUSTRATING. PEOPLE DON’T UNDERSTAND WHAT YOU ARE GOING THROUGH”

think it is important to accommodate and care for people in these situations – although I also think of myself as very lucky.”

Bonnie (her real name is Yvonne, but her baby brother pronounced it ‘Bonnie’, and she’s been called that ever since) is a Blesma Widow. She grew up in coastal Hampshire, the daughter of a Navy man, and married a sailor herself. “I was 19 and engaged to someone else when I met Sam at a party,” she says. “He was so lovely that I broke off my engagement and we were married 10 months later, in 1963, because he was going off to sea.

“Sam was always full of fun, and when he died I said he was 73 going on 10! We had two daughters, and when I got unwell with cancer, Sam left the Navy and came home. He became a postman, which he loved, and we made a home for ourselves in Havant.”

Bonnie’s diagnosis was a shock, however. “I had no symptoms,” she remembers. “I used to go to a birth control clinic because I was on the pill. I went for my annual smear test, and they sent me to a gynaecologist in Portsmouth. I had a biopsy and they discovered the cancer. I had eight weeks of radiotherapy. Thank goodness I’d already

had my kids because the treatment can leave you unable to have children.”

It was a traumatic time for all the family. “All I wanted to do in life, like any mother, was to survive to bring up my daughters, to tell them all the things they needed to know,” says Bonnie. “And we did get through it. The radiotherapy saved me, and I’ll always be grateful for that, but it also caused problems.”

THE RESULTS OF RADIOTHERAPY

Radiotherapy was a different business in the 1970s and had more severe side effects than the modern treatment. “I wouldn’t want to put anyone off having that treatment now because today it is much better,” says Bonnie, “but it gave me bowel issues right away. And that got worse over the years. I went back to college and ended up working at the council doing the payroll. But my condition got really bad, and I was surviving on Rich Tea biscuits and jellies just to get me through the day.

“It worsened still before I retired at the age of 61. By 2002, things were terrible. In the end I went back into hospital, and the doctors discovered that my condition had seriously deteriorated.”

Bonnie battled on, looking after her children, and eventually Sam as well when he lost his leg due to vascular problems. “He was diabetic and a heavy smoker, and in 2008 he had an amputation above the knee,” she says.

The pair were soon involved in Blesma. “We saw a magazine at the prosthetic centre and Sam got in touch with the Support Officer, Bill Gillett,” says Bonnie. “He visited and got us a lightweight wheelchair because I was having difficulty lifting our heavy one into the car. He also got some bath seats for Sam. Then we started going to the Portsmouth Branch for their lunches and meetings. It was a lot of fun. Sam loved it, and I became a Welfare Officer, staying in touch with the Blesma Widows.”

But Bonnie’s health struggles continued. “Eight years ago, I had a colectomy, which involves removing a lot of your bowel. I was in hospital for four months, but that didn’t work. Eventually, I had an ileostomy where the small intestine is diverted through an opening in your tummy. At the same time, the doctors discovered that I wasn’t absorbing any goodness from my food, so I went on something called total parental nutrition, or TPN.”



Despite everything, Bonnie feels very fortunate: she can use the drip (usually at night) and go about her business during the daytime



“THE NUTRITION YOU NEED GOES INTO THE CENTRAL VEIN IN YOUR SHOULDER. IT TAKES 10 HOURS, SO I DO IT AT NIGHT”

“This puts the nutrition you need right into the central vein in your shoulder. It takes 10 hours, so I do it overnight and am asleep for most of it. I have three nights of feed and three nights of saline because I also lose fluids and dehydrate easily. I feel OK most of the time. I go to a clinic every six months and have blood tests every three, and the nutrition team are brilliant.”

KEEPING A POSITIVE OUTLOOK

Despite everything she has been through, Bonnie feels fortunate: in previous decades, people with her medical condition were confined to hospital for life. Now she can hook herself up to the drips at night and go about her everyday business during the day.

“For a while, nurses would come and connect and disconnect me, but then they taught me how to do it myself,” she says. “It’s amazing what can be done with nutrition these days, and I can eat and enjoy some

regular foods, although I need to be careful. If I go anywhere, I need to make sure they have a fridge for my feed, and I need to take lots of stuff, including dressings,” she says. “But I’ve found that Blesma is great for me – the Association always manages, there is always someone to help with a car, I guess Blesma is used to everything!

“But it has made me very aware of hidden disability. There are children with the same



issue as me who go to school with a feed backpack and sit and do lessons. Other people can’t eat or drink at all.”

Bonnie still enjoys a busy social life, with Blesma at its heart. “After Sam passed away, I went to Widows and Seniors Weeks,” she says. “I love them, along with the Members’ Weekend. I love the service of remembrance, and I like to listen to the AGM. The evening meal is wonderful – at the last one, my friend and I did a conga around the room!

“I’ve made some very good friends through Blesma. I met one lady, Vera, on my first Widows Week. She’s 94, and I ring her every week, which she loves because she doesn’t go out much. She has come to stay with me and I always keep in touch.”

Most of all, Bonnie is all about looking on the bright side of life. “I keep a positive attitude,” she says. “I have a home, I’m warm, I enjoy reading and knitting, I have my daughters and grandchildren nearby, and lovely neighbours in my flat. I compile family histories, and even though the Portsmouth Branch is closed, I still contact the same Widows, and it is always nice to talk. I can report back if anyone has a problem, too.”

“I’ve made some very good friends through Blesma. It is always nice to talk, and I can report back if anyone has a problem,” says Bonnie





Members on stage at this year's Belfast International Tattoo

Words: Jessica Mackinnon Photography: The Belfast International Tattoo

BRINGING THE HOUSE DOWN

THE BELFAST INTERNATIONAL TATTOO IS A HUGE IMPORTANT MILITARY EVENT IN NORTHERN IRELAND. THIS YEAR, BLESMA WAS ITS CHOSEN CHARITY – AND ITS MEMBERS WERE THE STARS OF THE SHOW

The second Bryan Phillips's prosthetic limb hits the floor, the crowd in the SSE Arena erupts with noise. It's the biggest cheer – and the only standing ovation – of the whole evening. Welcome to the opening night of the Belfast

International Tattoo. This is the biggest Ulster Scots Community event in Northern Ireland and Blesma is its nominated charity for 2022. To recognise the Association's 90th anniversary, Members from Northern Ireland have also been invited to share the stage with some impressive acts from around the world. Outreach Officer Fiona Morrison has even secured a VIP dressing room for the Members taking part, as well as a hospitality suite for Saturday's matinee show.

Over the last couple of months, Fiona has been meeting with the Tattoo's organisers. What started as an offer of tickets for Members grew into a full production for the Association's 90th birthday.

"Back in 2018, I approached the Belfast Tattoo to see if we could get show tickets for our Members and their families, and that's when I was introduced to Colin Wasson, who is the founder of the Tattoo," says Fiona. "The following year, Colin contacted me and asked

if I would like some tickets. We kept in touch and at the beginning of this year, he approached me saying they were considering choosing Blesma as their charity.

"After that first meeting, the conversation went from being charity of choice to bucket collections to then being asked: 'What do you think about some of the Members taking part in the

performance?' Then the compère wanted to talk about Blesma as our Members made their way across the stage. The last part of the package was being able to host more Members, and their families and supporters, in a VIP lounge for the Saturday matinee. The more I could explain what this opportunity would mean to





The Tattoo is an important military event in Northern Ireland's calendar





Above: The Pride of Ballinran marching band and (above right) Blesma takes to the stage

Blesma and how it would help our Members, the more opportunities we were offered.”

When the news was shared with the membership, Fiona was flooded with positive responses; from messages of congratulations to offers of volunteering at the bucket collections and, of course, featuring in the show itself.

“If you want people to really understand what Blesma is, you must show them the full picture. Our veterans are obviously the group people initially see or think of, and it just so happened that we were able to include a single amputee, a double amputee, and Members with loss of use of limb in the event. But it was important for us to include a widow and a volunteer as a reminder of their important roles and hard work.”

A COMPLETELY DIFFERENT BALLGAME

Former Lance Corporal of the North Irish Horse Graham Kelly was one of the seven selected and credits the work of the Outreach programme in Northern Ireland for getting Blesma at such a prestigious event.

“I’ve been a Member for 15 years, and since Fiona came on board four years ago, it’s been a completely different ballgame,” says the 55 year old, who lost his left leg above the knee after a road traffic accident in Germany. “She has really brought Blesma to us and has given us experiences we’ve never had before living in Northern Ireland. It was brilliant to be able to highlight Blesma at such a massive event.”

“WHEN THE CURTAIN OPENED AND WE WALKED OUT TO THOUSANDS OF PEOPLE FROM MY HOME CITY, IT WAS VERY EMOTIONAL”





Member Colin Shields served in the Ulster Defence Regiment, as did Jean McCready's late husband. A couple of years ago, Jean gifted her husband's medals to Colin to wear. Now, Colin has buffed them so Jean can proudly wear them as she crosses the arena. Meanwhile, Irish Guards veteran Bryan Phillips has been called upon to be Blesma's flagbearer.

"This year is the tenth anniversary of losing my legs while serving," says the 36 year old, who stepped on an IED in Afghanistan. "It's been a roller coaster 10 years, with a lot of highs and lows, but I never imagined I'd be doing something like this. Being here is up there with one of the most amazing things I've ever done. To be Blesma's standard bearer and to represent Blesma at such a huge event is an honour. I'm just privileged."

IT'S SHOW TIME

It's time for the compère to introduce Blesma to the 5,000-strong crowd, and the second the audience can see the group, the applause begins. And it just doesn't stop. Some people in the crowd begin to get to their feet, others do likewise, and before long every audience member is standing and clapping. For the entire four minutes that the Blesma Members are on the stage, the standing ovation continues. "I'm probably the only one who will admit to this, but I did cry," says Ulster Defence Regiment veteran Brian McKee. "The moment the curtain opened and the cheering started, it was

amazing. What the compère was reading out made me think back on my Army career. Everything was flicking through my head. It was thinking of absent friends that made me shed a tear. I did gather myself together and I am honoured to have been here."

Much to everyone's surprise, the standing ovation on the opening night is repeated during the next day's performances, this time with fellow Blesma Members and the group's family and friends in the audience.

"There are simply no words to describe how I feel," says Bryan Phillips. "Once that curtain opened and we walked out to thousands of people in my home city with family members in the crowd, it was very emotional – just unbelievable."

Before and after each show, Blesma's Members and volunteers were present, armed with collection buckets and leaflets. "We are in a cost-of-living crisis but as I looked around all I could see were notes going into the buckets," says Fiona. Thanks to the generosity of those who attended the Tattoo, Blesma's buckets collected a whopping £7,512. And since the show, four potential Members have applied to join the Association, a local school has been in touch wanting to fundraise for Blesma and a number of organisations have invited Fiona to do a presentation, which opens up the chance to fundraise further. The Belfast International Tattoo has also confirmed Blesma will be its charity of the year in 2023. Now that's worth a standing ovation!



Bucket collections during the three performances raised more than £7,500 in donations

WHERE DOES HE FIND ALL THE TIME?

MEET DAVID DENT; AN EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, HONORARY PROFESSOR, ENTREPRENEUR IN RESIDENCE, MBE RECIPIENT AND... CABER TOSSER

David Dent, 56, from Lanarkshire in Scotland, has already lived an extraordinary life. Since being injured while serving in the Queen Alexandra's Royal Army Nursing Corps, he has become a sportsman, a leading advocate for disabled veterans, a university lecturer, an executive director of a major company, and a consultant for the Scottish Government. Oh, and he is the third consecutive generation of his family to be awarded an MBE...

How come you chose a career in the military?

Even though my father and grandfather were soldiers, I didn't plan on joining. I trained as a nurse and worked in intensive care, but I enjoyed the challenge of helping critically ill patients and eventually thought military patients would be even more interesting, so I joined up. I dealt with tropical diseases, training incidents, injuries on deployment, and lots of battlefield trauma – and was deployed in Bosnia and Northern Ireland. That meant advanced resuscitation, advanced life support, burns management...

But then you got injured yourself?

I was injured a couple of times in Bosnia in 1995. Firstly, there was a blast injury from a missile, and although I thought I'd recovered, it caused long-term problems – neurological damage and a shrapnel injury. Then, in 1999, whilst providing medical cover for ATO (a Bomb Disposal Officer and his team) I damaged my back. It became clear that I couldn't continue in the military. My neurological problems got worse; I had memory issues, problems with speech and swallowing, then my mobility

went downhill. I had stints in hospital, occupational therapy, psychiatry, psychology, and heavy sessions in the gym to try and optimise what I had.

So sport played a part in your recovery?

A massive one. I'd loved sport when I was in the military, and so post-rehab I joined Forth Valley Disability Sport. I tried lots of sports to see what I'd enjoy, and did the GB Paralympic biometric measurements. For me, it was field athletics – shot put, javelin, discus and hammer. I loved the mixture of people I met and found a great culture and community; lots of people with challenges trying to be the best they could be.

You've become a major advocate for disability sport...

I realised that lots of people I was competing with didn't have a voice. I've tried to help promote sport so people can see it as something fun and something that can lead to high achievement. It is great for fitness and for motivation. I also try to be a voice for veterans with disability at a Scottish Government level. I've given talks to the Parliament – it's important that people in power hear from us. I'm not too bad at making a point, so I see it as my responsibility to my brothers and sisters in uniform.

You've also helped make historic changes at the Highland Games...

A team of injured veterans were invited to the Games in Mey, Thurso. It was an eye-opener for everyone. People have perceptions of disability and were maybe asking if that fits with the Highland Games. And we

“I try to be a voice for veterans with disability at a government level. It’s important that people in power hear from us”



Words: Nick Moore Photography: Andy Bate



Clockwise from above: David in his day job as an executive director, competing in the Highland Games, and at Buckingham Palace



had all sorts of people on our team; some with long hair and big beards. But we were up for the challenge. We were lifting the Ardblair Stones and throwing the hammer from our wheelchairs. Suddenly, these non-disabled 'heavies', who think it's all about being the biggest, were telling us we had more grit than them! It was great because we showed that the events could be really inclusive, and people enjoyed seeing us compete.

You even tossed the caber...

I did! It's a three-metre tree trunk. Standing up, you lean it on your shoulder, get balanced, then walk forwards. From a wheelchair, I had to have it lifted into my hands, then I had to power through and flip it. My arms were tired – especially after the hammer and shot put, too!

You also have a pretty full-on day job...

I work for a large international clinical research organisation called Parexel Biotech. I'm an executive director in our commercial organisation in Europe. The company runs clinical studies for biotech and pharmaceutical companies, so they can have their medicines and vaccines approved as being effective and safe. There's lots of travel, and I've also been asked to co-lead a disability strategy steering committee. We look at what we do for disabled patients in our studies, what we do for our employees, how we can hire more people with disabilities, and how to make it an inclusive place to work.

And you're involved in academia, too?

I'm an honorary professor at Stirling University's Business School where I teach business skills, but also resilience and diversity. I'm also an entrepreneur in residence at Nottingham University's Haydn Green Institute for Innovation and Entrepreneurship. We mentor start-up

companies out of university. I also recently got made a companion of the Chartered Management Institute, which is an organisation that provides training, resources and thought leadership for managers. I run lectures and webinars on diversity, too – not just on disability, but also as an ally for other minority groups, whether it's gender, race or LGBTQ+.

Tell us about your PTSD campaign...

We made a series of videos about the portrayal of veterans and those with Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in the media. PTSD is seen as something to be wary of, perhaps even dangerous. As with many mental health issues, there is a lack of understanding, but there is treatment available and a huge amount of support out there, and people can get better.

The first step is to talk about how you are feeling...

Yes. Men don't talk about their mental health, and male suicide is ridiculously high. It is clearly a very serious issue. The first step is to talk. The military mindset is to soldier on, but that definitely doesn't work with PTSD. Other parts of the military culture – being part of a team, helping each other – should be far more prevalent. It is not something to be frightened about. Blesma can help, and I've only recently got involved with the Association.

Finally, what is it with all the MBEs in your family?

I got mine for my work for people with disabilities, students and veterans. My dad got his for his work with major organisational and operational delivery in BAOR (British Army of the Rhine) and ultimately was second-in-command of the Royal Scots, and my grandad got one for services to farming. I do tell my children about this, but they haven't taken up the challenge yet!



Words: Danny Buckland Photography: Robert Chadwick, West Ham United Football Club

WEST HAM AND BLESMA REMEMBER

THE ASSOCIATION HAS BUILT A STRONG RELATIONSHIP WITH WEST HAM UNITED FOOTBALL CLUB OVER THE LAST SIX YEARS. THIS YEAR, THEY TEAMED UP TO COMMEMORATE REMEMBRANCE





The crowd falls silent and there is only a gentle breeze to accompany the solemn atmosphere as Blesma Member Matty Woollard lays the wreath in the centre circle of the London Stadium in memory of the fallen. A season-high 62,459 fans show their respect as a bugler's Last Post echoes around West Ham United's vast London arena as a Blesma Guard of Honour lowers its flags along the touchline.

The effect is spellbinding as fans from both teams, as well as the players, officials and staff come together to remember. With a blast of the whistle, referee Michael Oliver brings the ceremony to a close and the Blesma Members receive a thunderous reception as they leave the pitch and make their way to watch the Premier League game on the eve of Remembrance Sunday.

STRENGTHENING CLOSE BONDS

Blesma's close relationship with West Ham continues to grow, with the Premier League club's players keen to pay tribute to the sacrifice of injured Armed Forces personnel and the Association's work to help them live full lives after service. To mark the occasion a group of 16 Members have been invited to the last league fixture before the 2022 World Cup kicks off in Qatar – and they have been given pride of place along the touchline as the Hammers and opponents Leicester City take to the field.

Matty Woollard joins West Ham and England legend Sir Trevor Brooking for the wreath laying. "The crowd was incredible and the silence was awe-inspiring. It was a very humbling experience," says the former Royal Anglian (and West Ham fan!) who lost his leg after stepping on three landmines that were all placed together in Afghanistan. "Nothing can prepare you for that level of commitment from such a huge crowd. It is fantastic to have a relationship with a great club, and it's an honour to represent Blesma.

"The club has been our charity partner for more than five years now, and it has been fantastic. You can tell it means a lot to them; the generosity and support from the fans is first class."

SUPPORTING THE COMMUNITY

"Community is a fundamental part of our football club and our charitable endeavours are key to that," explains Alicia Goulding, West Ham United Charity Partnerships Lead after the match. "Blesma, being a locally based Armed Forces charity, has been a selected charity partner of West Ham for a number of years now, and we've got a fantastic relationship with everyone at the Association.

"To be able to give something back to people who have given so much for us and our country goes way beyond football. We've all been proud to provide fundraising opportunities, unique moments and numerous awareness activities to support Blesma's cause, and we're delighted that



"IT IS FANTASTIC TO HAVE SUCH A RELATIONSHIP WITH A GREAT CLUB, AND IT IS AN HONOUR TO BE REPRESENTING BLESMA"



Members soak up the applause from fans before forming a Guard of Honour on the touchline during the Remembrance commemorations



MARTIN BRUMMITT

Martin, from Leeds, served in the Royal Inniskilling Dragoon Guards. He was injured shortly after he left service but only joined Blesma five years ago. He took part in the Guard of Honour and, the following day, joined the Blesma contingent at the Remembrance Sunday parade at The Cenotaph

Tell us about your weekend...

It was fantastic to attend both events. To be honest, I'm more of a rugby league fan than a football supporter, but it was a great day nonetheless. I took part in The Cenotaph parade on Remembrance Sunday, so that was very special.

How was the day at West Ham?

Being there and watching the game was wonderful. They made us feel very welcome and the crowd was amazing. Being out on the pitch with the flags was a great experience, and when we came off, the crowd were brilliant. The applause and cheering were something else!

How are you enjoying being a Blesma Member?

I came to it a bit late, as I was injured ages ago, but my wife and I get so much from it. It has been a revelation for us and now fills our lives. There is barely a week that goes by when we are not doing something with Blesma either on activities or events, or helping out and volunteering.

Would you recommend Blesma?

I'm 65 years old and it has really changed my life over the last few years. It was so helpful to meet people on Zoom during the pandemic, and they have gone on to become friends once we were able to meet them in person. The great thing about Blesma is that you can meet people for the first time on an activity or at an event, and by the end of the weekend you are friends for life!





Sixteen Blesma Members were invited pitchside for the last home match before the World Cup began

the match day has formed part of our Remembrance commemorations this year.

“As a nation we are all thankful for the sacrifices our Armed Forces make to keep us safe. The football club is honoured and privileged to show support where we can because this is something that we all feel is extremely important. We’ve had some really great events across the years covering everything from Blesma Members visiting the training ground and meeting the first-team players, to match-day events and donations. Supporting causes such as Blesma is extremely fulfilling for all of us and a principal aspect of our football club.”

Chris Knight, Blesma’s Corporate and Regional Fundraising Manager, agrees:

“Today’s Remembrance commemorations have been a huge success and incredibly moving. They have allowed us to fundraise and have a great presence on what is always a special day in the military calendar.

“The crowd at West Ham was absolutely incredible. They were really respectful and receptive, and the cheers the Members were given from both sets of supporters as they left the field will live long in our memories.

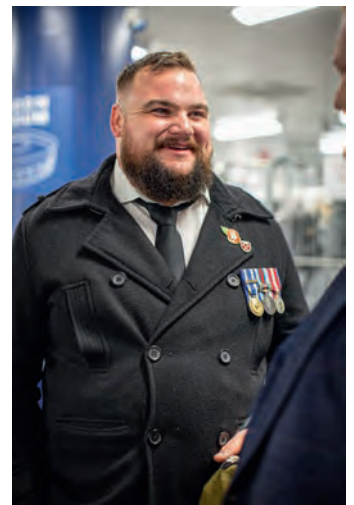
“The Members had a great time – they were able to enjoy the day but also support the Association by being the public face of Blesma. Speaking to them before and after the event, they see these opportunities as a chance to give back for what the Association has given them, and they did us proud!”

Blesma has had a strong relationship with the Premier League club for more than six years now. Bucket collections at several match days every season have allowed Blesma to have a platform in front of tens of thousands of people, while Members have regularly been invited to the club’s Rush Green training complex, which is just 10 minutes from Blesma’s former head office in Chadwell Heath, Essex.

This strong partnership, which continued throughout the pandemic, has strengthened every year, with the players and staff always keen to boost the profile of the Association and publicise its work. Jamie Weller, a former RAF aviation engineer whose military career was cut short by sight issues, was interviewed pitchside before the match, for example, and a video featuring Members Lamin Manneh, Alison Grant and Vinod Budhathoki was played to the crowd at half-time.

“It was an amazing experience and a great day,” says Jamie at full-time. “It is a privilege to be here, to have been interviewed and to be able to get the message out there about

“WE ARE THANKFUL FOR THE SACRIFICES OUR ARMED FORCES MAKE. THE CLUB IS HONOURLED TO SHOW SUPPORT WHERE WE CAN”



Blesma and how the Association has helped me and others in similar situations. The atmosphere was incredible and the crowd's reaction was so positive.

"It was also great that everyone was able to come together in such tough times to remember the people who served, along with emergency services and civilians who have been affected by conflict, and it was an honour to be there representing Blesma."

Danny Green, 46, who served in the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers before losing his right arm above the elbow in a train accident, agrees: "Remembrance is so important and we need to make sure that continues to be the case for future generations. I talk to my eight-year-old

daughter about it all the time," he says. "When I lost my arm, I was self-employed and didn't know where to turn or what to do, but Blesma was there for me and really helped, so it is fantastic to represent the Association and spread the word."

For Matt Weston and Nigel Smith, who both happen to be passionate West Ham United supporters, the day has extra meaning. "It is fantastic to be associated with the club during Remembrance, so that made this a very special game indeed," says Nigel. "It's my birthday too, so the win would have been a good present."

Matt adds: "It's great for more of the public to see Blesma and become aware of the work the Association does. The

exposure we have had today with the pitch presence and the video being played at half-time will have a big impact."

The relationship is stronger than ever and the mutual respect between club and charity is clear to see – both in the stands and behind the scenes.

"Blesma's Members are remarkable and it is a privilege to host them and help to raise awareness for the charity," says Alicia. "In the run-up to match day, the players showed their support for the charity in training by wearing Blesma 90th anniversary t-shirts, and then the collaborative Remembrance commemoration at the match at the London Stadium was outstanding. Everyone was excited, on great form and represented the charity and the Armed Forces sublimely.

"There was an emotional response from our supporters. It was extraordinary to hear the strong applause and cheering from the crowds following Jamie's interview pitchside, as the Blesma Members completed their Guard of Honour and after Matt's wreath laying. It was really special for everyone."

"REMEMBRANCE IS SO IMPORTANT AND WE NEED TO MAKE SURE THAT CONTINUES TO BE THE CASE FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS"



ANIL GURUNG

Anil, who served in the 2nd Regiment Royal Gurkha Rifles for seven years, attended the match with his wife Babina. The 35 year old, who lost his right leg after stepping on an IED just 20 days before finishing a tour in Afghanistan in 2009, travelled from his home in Maidstone to join the Blesma team at the stadium.

Did you enjoy the day?

It was really enjoyable. I thought it was great to get out and do something different and meet new people.

What was the highlight?

It was definitely going out onto the pitch and waving our Blesma flags as the teams came out and Matty laid the wreath in the centre circle.

What was the crowd reaction?

The fans were amazing and very appreciative of Blesma and its Members. That was as good as it got for the fans though, as West Ham unfortunately lost.

Was it poignant to be there at Remembrance weekend?

It was a special occasion for all of us and a time to remember friends and colleagues who are no longer here. The crowd were really respectful and it made for an incredible atmosphere.

How long have you been a Blesma Member?

I joined soon after I was injured, while I was at Headley Court. I have been on a family vacation with my wife and two children that was organised by Blesma. I'm looking forward to doing more with the Association and meeting more Members.

WEST HAM UTD: SUPPORTING ITS COMMUNITY ON AND OFF THE FIELD

As a focal point for the football club's community activity, the West Ham United Foundation is an independent registered charity based in Newham, that spans east London, Essex and international areas. Aiming to respond to local need, unite the community and provide an environment for all to thrive, the charity delivers more than 35 initiatives annually across health, education, employability and football development.

"The Foundation represents the values of our club and embodies a strong commitment to making a long-term positive difference to individuals, groups and communities," says Alicia Goulding, West Ham United Charity Partnerships Lead. "Having a dedicated team on the ground is integral to our impact and represents what being part of West Ham United is all about."



West Ham and
England player
Declan Rice trains
in a Blesma t-shirt



Bulletin

Widows Week at Cricket St Thomas

Cricket St Thomas is a historical manor that has had various guises throughout the years. Home to aristocracy and a wildlife park, it was the manor in the show *To The Manor Born* and it even doubled up as Crinkley Bottom in *Noel's House Party*. Now it is a Warner hotel and, for a week in September, it was home for eight delightful ladies taking part in Widows Week.

The original aim was that everyone would arrive on the Monday, but due to the sad passing of Her Majesty The Queen some arrived on Monday and others on Tuesday morning. This meant swapping around the planned days although, in retrospect, it worked out really well. Tuesday became our day at the Warner hotel as it has various activities on throughout the day as well as extensive grounds that can be explored. All the ladies, including Jill who had only just arrived with bag in hand, had a go at the line dancing lesson. It soon became apparent that we had some ringers in the group as Meghan, I am sure, could have taken the lesson.

Sadly, due to a dodgy knee, I was unable to take part but I was able to brave the walk to the other side of the hotel where we had arranged an afternoon tea in the library. It was as lovely as it sounds, with delicious



cakes and sandwiches, and oodles of tea and coffee. This gave everyone the chance to start chatting and get to know each other. It must be said that the ladies all gelled very quickly and it turned out that some of the ladies may have known each other years ago!

“Irene said she trained as a nurse in Torbay Hospital and so did I three months ahead of her,” Lynne explained. “We even discovered that we flew to Hong Kong on the same VC10 in November 1969 – she as

a Naval wife and me as a QARANC sister.”

After the tea, some of the ladies went for a walk to enjoy the scenery. After a hearty dinner it was straight to the entertainment lounge where we saw a seasoned comedian and music act, and some of the ladies got up to put their line dancing into practice.

On Wednesday we visited Forde Abbey which, much like Cricket St Thomas, has seen various iterations throughout the years. Starting off as a monastery it became a family home where they worked extensively

“There were heartfelt discussions of loss, hard times and loneliness. The ladies came together very quickly; everyone arrived as relative strangers but left as new friends”

Continued from over

on the gardens, which were grand and beautiful. Touring the house, the ladies were able to see various wedding dresses throughout the ages which prompted various memories and discussions. We also ended up talking about various recipes including brawn and chitterlings, which I won't repeat in case anyone is about to eat, but be assured there really was nothing left to waste. Another lovely evening at the hotel where, after dinner, the entertainment put on a show of covers from the band Queen that was toe-tappingly good.

Thursday was a busy day as we headed out early to Seaton, a cosy seaside town. The first part of the day was spent doing arts and crafts with driftwood and other items that had washed up on the shore. That was once we were able to steer the ladies through the craft shop in the first place! I now appreciate the expression 'herding cats'.

Our talented instructor enabled us to make our own little driftwood pictures, there was a lot of creativity on show and some very impressive pictures were made. A mention must be made of Yvonne who was able to fashion a Sea King helicopter out of broken tiles, it looked brilliant! We then had glorious fish and chips (some pieces looked more the size of a whale!) and the ladies had some free time to look around the town.

Jess Linge (London and South East Outreach Officer) was about 21 seconds late meeting the ladies but was met with a chorus of 'Why are we waiting?' from the cheeky group. We boarded the Seaton open-topped electric tram and were given a commentary from the driver as we passed though the nature reserve and marshland. These were old style trams but the ladies, including Vera who is in her early 90s, navigated the very steep and small steps with the precision of a seasoned mountain goat.

On our return to the hotel we all had a quick cup of tea while we handed out several awards to recognise some of the achievements and funny events across



Trams, teas and tonnes of talking: Widows Week was once again an unbridled success



the week. That evening we had an ABBA tribute, although it was performed by only two ladies, so it was more 'AA' than 'ABBA'.

This was a busy week filled with laughs, caring support, and lots of food. What struck me was how the week enabled the ladies to come together and discuss their experiences of being married to a Blesma Member, the challenges they'd had living with an injured veteran and what that means for them now that their husbands have sadly passed away.

There were heartfelt discussions of loss,



hard times and loneliness. These ladies really came together very quickly and supported each other, either by offering an arm to help someone walk or taking the time to really listen and share stories. It truly showed the spirit of what the week can achieve as the ladies have all left with phone numbers, email addresses and plans to meet again in the future.

Everyone came as relative strangers but left as new friends.

BSO Steve Burrell

What the Widows had to say:

LYNNE

I have always been shy about attending a Widows Week, as I felt I could afford to go on holiday and, as Blesma is a charity, I should leave places for those less well off. I didn't think I would know anyone. Having Zoomed into the Blesma South's coffee mornings during lockdown I chatted with a lady who had been on a Widows Week, and she encouraged me to apply. She did tell me that the first 48 hours would be everyone talking about their husbands 'war wounds' – how wrong could she be. I arrived late afternoon, unpacked and decided to go out and look for any signs of Blesma before dinner, where I met Jess and Steve who were our hosts for the next few days. I also met four other widows, who were very friendly and ranged in age from their 70s to 94.

One lady asked if I had travelled far, and I said from Torquay as I had been to my sister's. She said she had trained as a nurse in Torbay Hospital and so did I, three months ahead of her. We even discovered that we flew to Hong Kong on the same VC10 in November 1969; she as a Naval wife and me as a QARANC sister.

Our activities started on the Tuesday lunch time with a cream tea which was delicious and made us all feel that a walk in the grounds was called for before dinner! Wednesday saw us board a minibus to go to Forde Abbey. The sun shone and we had a lovely walk in the beautiful garden before visiting the house where we saw a display of wedding dresses, and finally a look around the gift shop.

Thursday saw us get out early to go to Seaton. We spent the morning in a craft shop creating pictures using pebbles, dry seaweed, and bits of glass and pottery collected on the shore. We all amazed ourselves at our ability with the craft. We then had a delicious fish and chip lunch before a walk on the seafront followed

by a trip on a tram to Colyton past the salt marshes seeing many sea birds.

If you are not sure about attending a Widows Week then my suggestion is go and enjoy yourself with like-minded ladies.

YVONNE

I was excited to be offered a place on Widows Week. It is always nice to have something to look forward to and I was not disappointed. The Blesma reps, Steve and Jess, made me feel very welcome and treated me like a princess all week. Everything was organised; from trips to Seaton and Forde Abbey to afternoon tea and fish and chip lunches. I especially enjoyed the handicraft session followed by the trip on a tram through the countryside. But the biggest joy of the trip was meeting fellow Blesma Widows who have been through the same experiences as myself but can still laugh, dance and enjoy the company of others.

Thank you so much Blesma for a lovely week, I would attend another in a heartbeat!

IRENE

As soon as I heard I had a place on Widows Week I had mixed feelings. I was anxious about not knowing who would be there and excited as this would be my second time and I remembered how I had enjoyed it.

Please put your name down for Widows Week as you are well looked after by Blesma staff who try their very best to meet everyone's needs. My week at Cricket St Thomas flew by as all eight widows gelled together and we all looked out for each other. If we weren't out on a trip, we would take a gentle walk around the hotel grounds. Two other ladies and myself would go for a swim after breakfast.

One day, we had a craft morning and we all enjoyed it – especially knowing we were going to have fish and chips afterwards!

We all exchanged telephone numbers and hopefully we will be able to meet again sometime, or at least keep in touch.

The only downfall is that you will need bigger clothes when you get home as you are well fed!

“I have always been shy about attending a Widows Week, and if you are not sure my suggestion is go and enjoy yourself with like-minded ladies!”

“The biggest joy of the trip was meeting fellow Blesma Widows who have been through the same experiences as myself but who can still laugh, dance and enjoy the company of others. Thank you so much Blesma for a lovely week, I would attend another in a heartbeat!”

“Please put your name down for Widows Week as you are well looked after by Blesma staff who try their very best to meet everyone's needs”

Busy times for the Great Yarmouth and Lowestoft Branch

Warm wishes to the Blesma family, we trust you are all well. The Great Yarmouth and Lowestoft Branch has held a few activities since our last update. We hosted the Blesma stand at this year's Armed Forces Day in Lowestoft on 25 June, which was well attended by supporters in the area. It was a busy day despite the strong winds which sadly resulted in the cancellation of the planned air displays. Our annual lucky dip proved popular with the children and contributed towards our fundraising total.

A very successful Afternoon Tea took

place at Dunston Hall in Norwich on 30 July where we welcomed a number of Members from across the region. As always, the food was plentiful, with many people taking home 'doggy bags' full of treats! Thank you to all those who attended, and special thanks to those who travelled a considerable distance. We hope to do the same again next year.

Members joined the Sailability day on 03 August at Oulton Broad, Lowestoft. A good time was had by all, the weather was kind and the fish and chip supper was very well received!

If anyone is interested in attending any Branch events, please contact the Chairman, Philip (Bob) Monkhouse on 07951 292681.



There's nothing like an afternoon tea to get Branch members chatting

Albert Hooker

20.01.1933 – 06.09.2022



Albert Hooker was born in Portsmouth on 20 January 1933.

He was the middle of three children. Albert joined The Parachute Regiment in January 1951 and served for many years in 3rd Battalion. He completed tours in Cyprus, Egypt, Jordan and Malaya, but in December 1964, while serving in Bahrain, he was involved in a motorcycle accident in which he lost his right leg below the knee. Albert was determined to remain in service despite his injury and turned his talents to parachute rigging; a highly skilled task concerned with the design and maintenance of parachutes and associated equipment. Having successfully qualified as a Master Rigger in the United States Army Rigging School, he was appointed to the Red Devils Freefall Parachute Display Team as their rigging expert.



He later pushed his skills further and qualified as a freefall parachutist, and was able to test his own modifications and designs. In addition to his military duties, Albert was a keen supporter and Member of Blesma. During the 70s, he regularly parachuted at functions to raise funds for the Association.

In 1976, Albert was awarded a British Empire Medal in the New Year's Honours List in recognition of his service to the military. Altogether, Albert completed 112 jumps with a prosthetic leg. His last, in 1983, was in Germany for Blesma.

Away from military life, Albert married Sally in 1956 after first meeting over a garden wall. They went on to celebrate 66 happy years together and had two sons, Gordon and Gerald, and two daughters, Julie and Mary. In 1977, the family moved to Germany, where Albert worked at Bad Lippspringe. He joined the local Paderborn Disabled Sitball group. In 1981, he was part of a crew who sailed a yacht from Southampton to Australia – his section was from Cyprus to Bombay. In 1983, Albert and his family moved back to the UK until he was demobbed in October. He moved to Bridlington to carry on working as a Master Rigger for Thomas Sports, working alongside his old mate Lofty Thomas. He was still working for Thomas Sports into his eighties.

Albert was very much a family man who spent a lot of time with his wife and their four children, 11 grandchildren and 16 great grandchildren. Albert and Sally enjoyed going on breaks and holidays in the Mediterranean and the UK. He was on holiday with Sally, their son Gordon and daughter-in-law Sue, when he suffered a heart attack, from which he never fully recovered. For the next five months, he was in and out of hospital, until he died on 06 September 2022, aged 89.

Those who have passed away

May they rest in peace

AMBLER A J		22/08/2022
AMBROSE M J	Royal Navy	18/07/2022
BACON E I		17/08/2022
BOSLEY G H		16/08/2022
BRIDLE E R		17/10/2022
BUCKLEY E		07/09/2022
CARPENTER F		14/10/2022
CARTER D A		15/08/2022
CASSIE E	Royal Corps of Transport	15/08/2022
CHAPMAN K M		26/09/2022
CHARLTON L	Royal Artillery	06/07/2022
COLEGATE A		24/06/2022
DOEL B E		01/11/2022
FOSTER K E	West Yorkshire Regiment	16/08/2022
HARTE C	Parachute Regiment	31/10/2022
HILL T E	Royal Air Force	31/10/2022
HOOKER A J	Parachute Regiment	Not Known
JABLONSKI L G	Royal Welch Fusiliers	13/09/2022
KERSLAKE R J		17/10/2022
LEEK A F	Royal Navy	05/10/2022
LITTLE M		06/10/2022
MACRAE D P	Royal Air Force	29/09/2022
MAY D A	Royal Air Force	20/09/2022
MCADAM A F	Royal Highland Fusiliers	05/10/2022
MCALLISTER W C	Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders	30/06/2022
MCDUGALL C		31/10/2022
MCIVER J		24/10/2022
MCSORLEY T	Royal Scots	06/10/2022
MORRIS E	Royal Warwickshire	25/07/2022
NEWELL R M	Royal Artillery	26/09/2022
PEREIRA R C	Royal Air Force	27/09/2022
PRICE D R	Royal Welch Fusiliers	22/08/2022
RANDAL S		31/08/2022
READER P	REME	31/10/2022
SCARSBROOK B C	Royal Navy	31/10/2022
STEARN J		29/06/2022
SUTHERLAND J	Queen's Own Highlanders	31/10/2022
SYKES A B	Royal Air Force	28/06/2022
THOMAS E		03/10/2022
THOMPSON RG	REME	31/08/2022
TURNER B J		30/06/2022
VAUGHAN S	Royal Navy	20/10/2022
WATTS D	Parachute Regiment	01/08/2022

Northern Ireland update: awards, ovations and everything between

Iwould like to start by sharing how one Member has turned his learning into a hobby! We were extremely grateful to be awarded National Lottery Community Funding in Northern Ireland which enabled Outreach to run a number of creative activities. One of those funded projects was a two-day woodturning course. Under the guidance of an experienced woodturner, Members were tutored on this skill; turning bespoke designed bowls from blocks of timber.

Member Brian McKee enjoyed this so much that he purchased his own lathe and now enjoys the hands-on process of turning handles for blackthorn walking sticks; a pastime for him which is both satisfying and relaxing. He has kindly offered to give any donations for his work to Blesma.

OUTREACH ACTIVITIES

It has been great getting our families together for outdoor activities, and what a hoot we had at World of Owls wildlife sanctuary, learning about their habitat, the different types of owls found in Ireland and, of course, a few fun facts along the way. It was wonderful for the children to not only learn about the need for conservation but to get up close with some of these species. I think everyone left a little wiser!

Life can be much more interesting if you're learning new things; thanks must go to the AAVS – Positive Pathways NI Sports and Outdoor Navigator who kindly invited Blesma to a Try Out Family Day at their new outdoor activity centre; we didn't need to be asked twice! We were lucky to have the opportunity again to collaborate with Blind Veterans NI and I think everyone discovered their inner Bear Grylls.

With adult permission and under careful supervision, the children were taught some bushcraft survival skills. Just seeing their faces light up when they realised what they achieved was fantastic – or was it the sight of the sausages sizzling over the open fire?

Everyone who came along had the opportunity to try out fishing, airsoft and archery. A great day was had by all.



Mark Rogerson's grandchildren Cory and Ellie meet the residents at the World of Owls



Walking stick handles by Brian McKee



Brian in his workshop, mastering a lathe



'Wee buns' for Blesma's 90th anniversary



Bullseye for Support Officer Fiona (left)



Members' children get hands-on learning bushcraft survival skills before trying their hand at a spot of fishing and archery

Blesma's 90th year is coming to an end; there have been lots of fundraising events, celebrations and reflections to mark this anniversary. As one of our final anniversary events, Outreach decided to enjoy The Pantry cookery workshop, and decorating 'wee buns' was the order of the day. Everyone came away feeling like a master baker and with the memory of just how good buttercream tastes off the spoon!

FUNDRAISING AND AWARENESS RAISING EVENTS

What a privilege it was for Blesma to be the appointed charity for the Belfast International Tattoo 2022, and what an honour to have Blesma Members, a Widow and a volunteer take part in the shows (see p52 for more on the event). The dress rehearsals and backstage dressing room larks right through to the moment they entered the auditorium and moved across the arena will be memories they will never forget. The energy in the stadium was electrifying as they received a standing ovation at each performance – a memory



Veteran of the Year Robert Maxwell (left)

I will never forget! To the Members, volunteers, family members and associations who offered up their time to bucket collect, thank you. The general public attending the performances donated

more than £7,500; a phenomenal amount when taking into account the squeeze on every household at this time.

We have seen an increase in invitations to speak to community and veterans groups and also the opportunity to fundraise; this can only support and raise the profile of Blesma and we welcome this.

VETERANS AWARDS NI

I end my update with the news that two Members – Bryan Phillips and Robert Maxwell – were finalists at the first-ever Veterans Awards NI. The awards ceremony was held at Stormont Hotel Belfast, and it was fantastic to see so many proudly supporting the veteran community. It was an absolute privilege to witness Bryan and Robert being recognised; Bryan won The Community Award and the Inspiration of the Year award, and Robert won The Veteran of the Year award, was runner-up for the Inspiration of the Year award and picked up bronze for the Community award.

Fiona Morrison
Blesma Outreach Officer

Scotland update: An autumn of fun north of the border

PROSTHETIC AND PAIN MANAGEMENT FORUM

A popular forum that attracts a mix of amputee and loss of use Members. This activity is held every six-to-eight weeks with the BSO and Outreach Officer fully engaged. The forum is a great opportunity for the BSO to provide an overview of the current situation in the five Limb Centres followed by an open forum for Members to provide updates and discuss/share various tips and stories. The forum has consistently generated useful tips and good practice. Notably, one Member stated: "Every day is a school day," and he has been an amputee for more than 30 years! New Members have also found it invaluable, and it is proving to be a successful forum where Members can openly raise concerns in a safe environment, develop confidence and be part of the Blesma family.



BOOK GROUP

A popular at-home activity sees Members enjoying reading books that they would not normally select. The Members then get together on a Zoom meeting and discuss the book. The activity has generated a closer bond between Members and has made them feel part of Blesma. More importantly, it has helped to reduce loneliness and it has also enabled those who are less talkative to engage more in a social environment.

CANAL BOAT TRIP

A number of Members have been treated to a wonderful canal boat trip courtesy of The Seagull Trust. The trip started at the boatyard in Falkirk and then followed the canal route through the Falkirk Wheel and back. This event was so popular that both Seagull Trust boats were needed. A huge thank you must go to volunteers Lorraine and Pauline for hosting on one of the boats. This was a very relaxing and reflective journey, and some Members were even given the opportunity to steer the boat on the return leg, which was a great treat.



From baking to blasting around fields on quad bikes, Members have been up to all sorts

EDINBURGH MILITARY TATTOO

JWPM Ltd funding allowed a group of Members to attend an evening performance at the Edinburgh Military Tattoo. The weather was kind, which was a huge bonus, and those present enjoyed the show which this year was titled *Voices*. There were acts from all over the world and the whole performance was outstanding. All the Members appeared to have a wonderful time, and our thanks must go to JWPM for their kind sponsorship. Fingers crossed we are hoping that we can get some tickets for next year's performance, so watch this space!

ONLINE CHEESE TASTING

Members were sent kits with five cheeses, some condiments and crackers to allow them to take part in an online cheese tasting tutorial with their families. The tutorial was delivered by Svetlana, The Cheese Lady from Haddington. All the cheeses were artisan in nature and not the type of cheese that is readily available in the supermarket.

Svetlana talked about each cheese in turn, giving details of where it came from and how it was made, as well as asking the Members what they thought of the cheeses. This was such a popular activity that we have already booked Svetlana for another session in the lead up to Christmas.

JACK VETTRIANO EXHIBITION

A couple of Members mentioned this exhibition which was held in Kirkcaldy where the artist grew up, so we booked a group trip. Members initially watched a video of an interview with Jack Vettriano during which he discussed his life and influences. We then looked around the exhibition of his artwork and got a feel for the type of artist he is, and we could relate the paintings to the interview we had watched on video. Whilst his artworks may not have been everyone's cup of tea, meeting Members, getting out of the house and having lunch together ensured that the day was enjoyable for all.



It's up, up and away for John Bacon as he gets to experience flying in a glider

GLIDER TASTER SESSIONS

Another Member-suggested activity led to three gliding sessions being booked over a couple of months during which Members got the chance to experience a co-flight with an instructor in a specially modified disability friendly glider. The volunteers at Walking on Air were fantastic, and helped the Members in and out of the glider as well as talking to them about what they might experience on the flight. At the time of writing, we still have one session to go so fingers crossed that the weather holds out. This was a very popular activity and one that we will look to repeat next year.

READY STEADY COOK

The Live Life Partnership offered Blesma Members the chance to visit the Cyrenians Flavour and Haver project where they learned how to make a lemon and poppy seed loaf (without the use of mixers) and chocolate chip cookies. It was great fun and we had plenty of treats to take home.

QUAD TREKKING

Yet another activity requested by Members, and whilst we had the typical Scottish 'four seasons in one day' weather, it was great to be out on the quad bikes – particularly as several Members had never driven one before while others were enjoying getting back on a quad after a long time. The lunch that was provided was a real treat with hot tea and coffee being welcome after a trip out in the cold (and wet) Perthshire countryside.

ERMAC DROP IN/VISIT

After two years of negotiations with various veteran organisations about hosting a 'Blesma drop-in' clinic, the Erskine Reid MacEwan Centre in Bishopton opened its doors to the Association. Members were able to take part in archery and pottery activities or just bletcher with the Outreach Officer and each other. The BSO was on hand for one-to-one discussions before everyone sat down to enjoy a healthy lunch. The centre also offers genealogy, holistic

therapies, woodwork, art and many more activities.

MEMBER-LED ACTIVITIES

KEV BRYANT SHETLAND TALK

Kev, who has led Blesma photography trips in Shetland and has been heavily involved in our Scotland photography group, offered to chat to Members about the Shetland Islands and what it is like to live there. This was a well-attended and very enjoyable talk, and it was lovely to see more of Kev's wonderful photos.

GOOD CRAIC QUIZ

Member Lorraine Anderson was back in August with an entertaining and fun quiz. Looking ahead, we will return to monthly quizzes which are open to all Blesma Members who can get online.

A ROUND-UP OF MORE RECENT ACTIVITIES

- 06 October:** Lunch Dobbies Aberdeen (joint with Help for Heroes)
 - 07 October:** Gliding Taster Portmoak Airfield (rescheduled from September)
 - 07 October:** Good Craic Quiz
 - 13 October:** Online Book Group
 - 18-19 October:** Widows/Spouse Spa Break at Airth Castle
 - 01 November:** Resin Poppy workshop
 - 10 November:** Online Murder Mystery Game
 - 14 November:** Visit to ACVC Hub for Clay/Pyrography & model making
 - 21 November:** Online Prosthetics and Pain Management Forum
 - 09 December:** Online Cheese Tasting
 - 13 December:** Christmas Lunch Nairn
 - 14 December:** Christmas Lunch Lanarkshire
 - 15 December:** Christmas Lunch Perth
 - Nov/Dec:** Christmas Baking Competition
- Emma Gration*
Blesma Outreach Officer

Spotlight on Benefits and Social Care

Welcome to the Bulletin's regular section on the benefits system. As well as highlighting some useful information regarding benefits we will, on occasions, also be raising awareness of some health and social care matters or other available support. Blesma Members can either contact their Support Officer for further information about their benefit entitlement or get in touch with Blesma's benefits and social care adviser Liz Watling on iwabenefits@blesma.org or 020 8548 7080. These contact details are for Blesma Members only.

ENERGY BILLS REBATE

Many of you will be aware of the recent political turbulence which has resulted in some changes to government policies that have been detailed in previous Bulletins. The most recent change has been to the Energy Bills Support Scheme. Initially, the Government announced that the scheme would be available to all households for two years. At the time of writing, the Government had announced that support would be limited until April 2023. Following this, the most vulnerable would be supported, with details to be announced.

We would like to remind our Members of several different payments available. None are required to be paid back. If you are on a means-tested benefit, the payments will also not be treated as income within the calculation of your entitlement.

You could get up to four different types of payment depending on your circumstances on a particular date during a particular period:

- A cost of living payment, if you get a qualifying low income benefit or Tax Credits
- A disability cost of living payment, if you get a qualifying disability benefit
- A pensioner cost of living payment, if you are entitled to a Winter Fuel Payment for winter 2022 to 2023
- Energy bills support scheme

COST OF LIVING PAYMENT LOW INCOME BENEFITS AND TAX CREDITS

You may be entitled to a payment of £650, paid in two lump sums of £326 and £324, if you are receiving a qualifying low income benefit on a particular date. The qualifying benefits are:

Universal Credit

- You are eligible for the first Cost of Living payment if you were entitled to a payment of Universal Credit for an assessment period that ended in the period 26 April to 25 May 2022
- You are eligible for the second Cost of Living payment if you were entitled to a payment of Universal Credit for an assessment period that ended in the period 26 August to 25 September 2022

Pension Credit

- You are eligible for the first Cost of Living payment if you were entitled to a payment of Pension Credit for any day in the period 26 April to 25 May 2022
- You are eligible for the second Cost of Living payment if you were entitled to a payment of Pension Credit for any day in the period 26 August to 25 September 2022

Income Related Employment and Support Allowance

- You are eligible for the first Cost of Living payment if you were entitled to a payment of Income Related Employment and Support Allowance for any day in the period 26 April to 25 May 2022
- You are eligible for the second Cost of Living payment if you were entitled to a payment of Income Related Employment and Support Allowance for any day in the period 26 August to 25 September 2022

Income Related Jobseeker's Allowance

- You are eligible for the first Cost of Living payment if you were entitled to a payment of Income Related Jobseeker's Allowance for any day in the period 26 April to 25 May 2022

- You are eligible for the second Cost of Living payment if you were entitled to a payment of Income Related Jobseeker's Allowance for any day in the period 26 August to 25 September 2022

Income Support

- You are eligible for the first Cost of Living payment if you were entitled to a payment of Income Support for any day in the period 26 April to 25 May 2022
- You are eligible for the second Cost of Living payment if you were entitled to a payment of Income Support for any day in the period 26 August to 25 September 2022

Tax Credits

You are eligible for the first Cost of Living payment if you received either:

- A payment of Tax Credits for the year 2022 to 2023
- An annual award of at least £26 of Tax Credits for the tax year 2022 to 2023

The payment will usually be made separately from your benefit and appear on your statement as 'DWP Cost of Living'. If you have a joint claim with a partner, you will get one payment of £326 and one payment of £324 for your joint claim.

The first payment should have been received in July 2022 and the second by the end of November. If you did not receive a payment and think you were entitled, you can report this online at www.gov.uk/guidance/cost-of-living-payment

If you do not have online access, please contact the Department for Work and Pensions on the telephone number at the top of your award letter.

Disability Cost of Living Payment

You may get a lump sum payment of £150 if you are receiving any of the following benefits:

- Attendance Allowance
- Constant Attendance Allowance
- Disability Living Allowance
- Personal Independence Payment



- Adult Disability Payment
- Child Disability Payment
- Armed Forces Independence Payment
- War Pension Mobility Supplement

You must have received a payment of one of the qualifying benefits on 25 May 2022. If you get more than one of these benefits, you will receive one Disability Cost of Living payment only.

You should have received the payment from September 2022. Payments will be made to people who get a qualifying disability benefit from the Department for Work and Pensions before payments to people who get a qualifying benefit from the Ministry of Defence.

If you did not receive a payment and think you were entitled, you can report this online at www.gov.uk/guidance/cost-of-living-payment

If you do not have online access, please contact the Department for Work and Pensions or Veterans UK on the telephone number at the top of your award letter.

Pensioner Cost of Living Payment

If you are entitled to a Winter Fuel Payment for winter 2022 to 2023, you will get an extra payment for your household of £300 paid with your normal payment from November 2022. This is in addition to any Cost of Living payment you get with your benefit or Tax Credits.

To qualify for a Winter Fuel Payment this winter you must have reached State Pension age in the qualifying week beginning 19 September 2022. If you did not live in the UK during the qualifying week you might still get the payment if both the following apply:

- You live in Switzerland or a European Economic Area country
- You have a genuine link with the UK social security system, such as having lived or worked in the UK for most of your life

You cannot receive the payment if you live in Cyprus, France, Gibraltar, Greece, Malta, Portugal or Spain because the average winter temperature is higher than the warmest region of the UK.

You will not qualify if you meet one of the following excluding conditions during the qualifying week:

- You were in hospital getting free treatment for more than a year
- You lived in a care home for 13 weeks or more at the beginning of the qualifying week and have been getting a means-tested benefit
- You were in custody serving a sentence imposed by a court
- You need permission to enter the UK and your granted leave states that you cannot claim public funds

If you do not receive a payment and think you are entitled, please contact the Winter Fuel Payment Centre on 0800 731 0160.

Energy Bills Support Scheme

The Energy Bills Support Scheme provides a £400 non-repayable discount to eligible households to help with their energy bills this winter. You do not need to apply for the discount, and there's no need to contact your energy supplier.

The discount is automatic. If you get a message telling you that you need to apply, or asking for your bank or credit card details, this could be a scam. Please contact your energy supplier direct if you have any queries.

The discount will be applied to your monthly household electricity bill for six months starting in October 2022. You will get:

- £66 in October and November
- £67 in December, January, February and March

You'll get the discount monthly, even if you pay for your energy quarterly or use a payment card. If you did not receive your first instalment by the end of October, you need to contact your supplier.

Traditional prepayment meter users will get equivalent vouchers that will need to be redeemed. If you're a direct debit customer you will get the discount automatically in

Spotlight on Benefits and Social Care Continued

one of the following ways:

- A reduction to your direct debit amount
- A refund to your bank account following the monthly direct debit collection

If you pay by standard credit or payment card your discount will be automatically applied as a credit to your account in the first week of each month. The credit will appear as it would if you had made a payment.

If you have a smart prepayment meter your discount will be credited directly to your smart prepayment meter in the first week of each month.

If you have a traditional prepayment meter you will get the discount from the first week of each month. You'll get the discount automatically in one of the following ways:

- Redeemable vouchers, sent by SMS text, email or post
- An automatic credit when you top up at your usual top up point

Your electricity supplier will let you know in advance how you will get your discount. Your supplier should have your contact details, but if you're not sure or you don't receive any information from them, you should check that they have your latest phone number and email.

If you get vouchers you'll need to redeem them at a top-up point. Your supplier will tell you where to redeem them; for example, at a Post Office branch or a PayPoint shop.

If your landlord has a domestic electricity contract with a licensed electricity supplier, and you pay for your electricity as part of your rent, your landlord may pass their discount on to you. Your landlord may be reselling the electricity to you based on your usage, in which case:

- They must comply with the maximum resale price rules which say they must not make a profit
- The maximum resale price for electricity is currently set at the same price as that paid by the person reselling it

Your landlord may charge an 'all inclusive' rent, where a fixed cost for energy usage is included in your rental charges, in which case:

- They are encouraged to come to an agreement with you on the discount in line with the arrangement in your tenancy agreement
- The landlord's fixed charge may already provide you with similar protection from the impact of the energy price increase

If you are not connected to the grid – for example, those living in park homes or on heat network – the business which has the direct commercial relationship with the energy supplier (for example, the park owner) will receive the Energy Bills Support Scheme £400 payment. The Government is introducing legislation to make sure the payment is passed on to residents. You should not need to take any action to receive this support, which will be received by the end of the year.

BROADBAND SOCIAL TARIFFS

Social tariffs are special discount deals available for certain low income customers. They are generally cheaper than typical broadband tariffs. They are also not usually subject to exit fees or price rises.

You may be eligible for a social tariff if you receive a means-tested benefit, such as Universal Credit, Pension Credit, Income Related Employment and Support Allowance or Income Support. The exact requirements depend on the broadband provider. The person who receives the means-tested benefit must be the one who applies for the social tariff.

Is it worth signing up to a social tariff?

If you are eligible, it is worth weighing up your options. The key benefits of social tariffs are that they are affordably priced and you don't have to worry about the price going up, which is not the case with a lot of other broadband deals.

Some providers offer affordably priced deals on their standard tariffs, but these are often for a fixed period and after that the price often increases and an exit fee is introduced.

One downside of social tariffs is that there aren't a huge amount of high speed services available. Providers are trying to make it as easy as possible for customers to provide evidence of their benefit entitlement.

For further information about whether a social tariff is best for you, please contact your broadband provider, or check what other providers could offer you.



“I am a nurse, counsellor, driver, cook, housekeeper...”

First of all, who am I? My name is Jax. More importantly; what am I? I am a nurse, counsellor, social secretary, driver, housekeeper, cook... There must be an easier way of saying that. Oh yes, I am a carer.

My life had never been easy, so when I met and married Nigel at the age of 52, I thought that my unspoken prayers had been answered; finally I had someone who wanted to take care of me.

Nigel was the original bachelor and had, after eight months together, just started to adjust to the idea of being half of a couple when, on New Year’s Eve 1999, he walked down the road to buy me a newspaper and suddenly lost his sight.

In an instant I went from being cared for to being a carer. All of a sudden, it was my job to organise everything. When the vacuum cleaner got blocked it was my job to sort it, when the washing machine flooded, it was my job to sort it.

I was still working full time, and trying to do everything else seemed like an unclimbable mountain, but we got through those first few frightening months and I began to cope a little bit better. It required the planning of meals, housework, hospital appointments and everything else.

I had to learn to be a chiroprapist, manicurist and nurse. I had to learn how to deal with War Pensions, TV licensing, HMRC, and the local social services, not to mention fighting to be recognised as Nigel’s carer by the NHS.

Sadly, Nigel’s limited sight has deteriorated further and he now finds it really difficult to do simple things like make a coffee or a sandwich, which of course has affected his self esteem (and his temper).

Things became more complicated still when, in June 2017, a simple fall indoors resulted in the fracture of his lower spine. Now he was blind and immobile and, after several weeks in hospital and in respite care, I had to help him learn to walk again; a very slow process which frequently made him short tempered. Of course, I was in the firing line for all the unkind words.



Nigel can now walk short distances, but longer expeditions involve loading the wheelchair into the car. I am developing muscles in places that I didn’t know I had! But thank you Blesma for the wheelchair and other mobility aids – life would have been even tougher without your help.

We have also been lucky enough to have discovered UK Homes 4 Heroes, who have given us a couple of accessible caravan holidays free of charge.

Life in lockdown was quite a trial, especially as we felt incredibly isolated – as did everyone else – but we are still here, still together, and planning to renew our marriage vows soon.

Has the whole process been easy? No, it’s been hell on wheels! Has it been worth it? Yes, of course it has. As I have told him many, many times; he may be a grumpy old git – but he is my grumpy old git!

JDW

“On New Year’s Eve 1999, Nigel walked down the road to buy me a newspaper and suddenly lost his sight. In an instant I went from being cared for to being a carer”

Useful contact numbers across the Association

TITLE	NAME	TELEPHONE	EMAIL
BLESMA SUPPORT OFFICERS			
BSO (Prosthetics)	Brian Chenier	M 07796 715908	bsoprosthetics@blesma.org
BSO Eastern	Kevin Long	T 020 3954 3020 M 07825 536364	bsoeastern@blesma.org
BSO London & South East	Steven Burrell	T 020 7501 3030 M 07469 242277	bsolse@blesma.org
BSO Midlands	Vanessa Lucas	T 020 8548 7095 M 07825 536363	bsomid@blesma.org
BSO North East	Christine Landess	T 020 3954 3027 M 07917 972825	bsone@blesma.org
BSO North West	Amanda Brownlie	T 01257 795144 M 07825 536362	bsonw@blesma.org
BSO Scotland & Northern Ireland	Steve Burton	M 07766 258461	bsosniroi@blesma.org
BSO South	Pat Donnachie	T 020 3954 3026 M 07741 846106	bsosouth@blesma.org
BSO South West	TBC		
BSO Wales and West	Tom Hall	T 020 8548 7098 M 07780 165085	bsowest@blesma.org
Members Living Overseas	Liz Watling	T 020 8548 3516	iwabenefits@blesma.org
BLESMA OUTREACH OFFICERS			
Outreach Officer Eastern	Francesca Anastasio	M 07741 661159	outreacheastern@blesma.org
Outreach Officer London & South East	Jess Linge	M 07741 845793	outreachlse@blesma.org
Outreach Officer Midlands	TBC		
Outreach Officer Northern Ireland	Fiona Morrison	M 07741 744617	outreachni@blesma.org
Outreach Officer North East	Adele Miller	M 07741 847211	outreachne@blesma.org
Outreach Officer North West	Catherine Green	M 07741 846674	outreachnw@blesma.org
Outreach Officer Scotland	Emma Gration	M 07884 695703	outreachscotland@blesma.org
Outreach Officer South	Elmo Moses	M 07435 283102	outreachofficersouth@blesma.org
Outreach Officer South West	Sarah Payne	M 07741 737563	outreachsw@blesma.org
Outreach Officer Wales and West	Jason Suller	M 07741 744141	outreachwest@blesma.org

A love of gardening and the great outdoors

When I broke my back and became paralysed from the chest down, I thought my gardening days were over. At the time I was the head groundsman at a hotel with 100 acres and one apprentice. I was lucky that the boss of the hotel sent the groundsman to see me at the spinal injury centre every two weeks so I could keep him on track until I was available to come back to work.

My consultant will often comment to staff or when he

is at a meeting that I went back to work the day after I left the spinal injury centre. I reply that that, of course, is incorrect as I left the centre on a Friday and did not go to work on the following Monday!

As the years went by I had to learn new ways of doing things, and I also started growing vegetables in the hotel's walled kitchen garden. I soon found that the right tools allowed me to garden in a very conventional way. Long-handled tools reach

the ground while I am sitting upright in my wheelchair, and there is no reason to find sowing seeds further than you can reach difficult if you have a length of water pipe that you can send the seeds down. My motto is that you don't always have to adapt the garden, you can adapt the way you garden.

Currently, I volunteer at the National Memorial Arboretum where I help to look after several gardens including the Blesma Garden and the Blesma

Orchard. I also volunteer at another charity that promotes conservation, horticulture and agriculture for people with disabilities.

On top of that I help out in a few friends' gardens as well as looking after my own. I have a vegetable patch and a four-acre wildflower meadow and woodland in the National Forest. I get help when I need it but can do most things independently.

Paul Woolley

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“He is still my hero”

This is my husband's story, which I thought would be fitting to record as he reached his 90th birthday last December. Conscripted into the Army in 1950, Griff served in Malaya during the uprising where his right leg was severely wounded. The Iban tracker who was with the platoon was wounded in his thigh and wrist but stayed with Griff and together they managed to fight off the bandits for which tracker Awang received the George Cross.

The two men did not meet again until 1997. Griff had to have his right leg amputated at the military hospital in London. I met Griff in 1958, and we married in 1959. We celebrated 63 years of happy marriage in March. We recently had a stairlift fitted through Blesma, as Griff has had a few falls and has been unable to wear his prosthesis. After all these years, he is still my hero and that of our two sons and their families.
Avis Hughes





Make sure you're part of Members' Weekend 2023

Chesford Grange, 24-25 June 2023

If you would like to come along to meet old friends and make some new ones, to find out what Blesma Members are up to, and to have your say on what Blesma should be focusing on to support its Members, please put the date in your diary now. More information on how to attend will be given in the new year.

MORE INFORMATION COMING SOON



Free Will writing service

Blesma has now partnered with Guardian Angel, a new online Will writing service for anyone thinking of leaving a gift in their Will.

The online process is quick and checked by a qualified solicitor.

We remain part of the National Free Wills Network which connects individuals to a local solicitor who can guide you through the process of either amending an existing Will or creating a new one.



Blesma, The Limbless Veterans, 115 New London Road, Chelmsford, CM2 0QT
Registered Charity Numbers 1084189, SC010315

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post or email

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