

# Blesma

The magazine for limbless and injured veterans | Winter 2024

**PLUS:**

LEXI SETS FIFTH  
WORLD RECORD  
FAMILY GLAMPING  
BLESMA AT THE  
PARALYMPICS  
SWIM WITH DOGS

**BULLETIN INSIDE**



THE ACTIVITIES  
CALENDAR 2025 IS  
OUT. BOOK YOUR  
EVENTS NOW!



## BLESMA REMEMBERS THE FALLEN

THE ASSOCIATION TURNED OUT IN FORCE ONCE AGAIN  
TO PAY ITS REMEMBRANCE RESPECTS AT THE CENOTAPH

**PLUS:** ALL THE NEWS AND VIEWS FROM ACROSS THE ASSOCIATION



1 in 5 Blesma Members is helped through gifts in Wills

National Free Wills Network send a Will writing pack by post or email

Octopus Legacy online process takes just 30 minutes

No obligation to leave a gift

## Free Will Writing Service

Blesma is partnered with two free Will writing services for anyone wishing to leave a gift in their Will.

The National Free Wills Network will connect you to a local solicitor to guide you through the process of writing or amending your Will.

Octopus Legacy's online service is quick and easy, and every Will is checked by their team of qualified solicitors.

A gift in your Will helps us be there for limbless and injured veterans. Always.

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020 8548 7085

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[blesma.org/legacy](http://blesma.org/legacy)

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**EDITORIAL** If you have a story you'd like to put in the next issue, or if you'd like to get in touch to let us know what you think of this issue, drop us a line at [editor@blesma.org](mailto:editor@blesma.org)



Please send any written correspondence to the Blesma office at:  
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## Remembrance: a fantastic, joyful and, at times, emotional reunion

REMEMBRANCE IS ALWAYS ONE OF THE MOST POIGNANT EVENTS IN THE BLESMA CALENDAR. THIS YEAR, 60 MEMBERS PAID THEIR RESPECTS IN THE COMMEMORATION AT THE CENOTAPH

**A**ccompanied by thunderous cheering one minute, and absolute silence the next, Blesma Members paid their respects on Remembrance Sunday.

The 60-strong Blesma contingent took their place near the head of the parade to file past The Cenotaph in central London as thousands of spectators lined the route along Horse Guards Parade and Whitehall, with millions more watching on TV.

“It is always a very special and emotion-filled day,” said Vivienne Buck, Blesma’s Chief Executive, who led Blesma on the day. “All

our Members have gone through some sort of conflict in an operational context, have lost comrades and friends, or know people close to them who have been touched by events. It is a privilege and an honour to attend.”

Members assembled at a hotel on the Saturday for a social evening before travelling into London by coach early on Sunday morning.

“The evening before is a great social gathering,” added Vivienne. “The day itself is a fantastic, joyful and, at times, emotional reunion with former colleagues as the

**“It is always a very special and emotion-filled day,” said Vivienne Buck, Blesma’s Chief Executive**

veterans’ groups form up, but when the parade starts the banter stops.

“From the moment we step off, the public is cheering and clapping. Blesma always gets such a resounding reception. We pass thousands of other veterans first, and their respect for Blesma is unbelievable. Then we reach the public, and the cheering and clapping is so incredible that it can be overwhelming for some.

“There is a stark contrast when you are ‘eyes left’ at The Cenotaph in front of serving personnel, and it becomes totally quiet and very

poignant. It is a time for sombre reflection and remembrance. After that, the public's cheering comes back. It is very moving and there are many emotions as people remember operations they were on, where they were injured, or where they survived and others lost their lives; they remember other people who have passed, and all the time you are hit by the overwhelming support and respect from the public."

Member Trustee Lisa Johnston, a left-leg above-knee amputee, was attending her first Remembrance Day parade with Blesma. "I felt very humble and nervous," she said. "I'm clumsy and thought if there was a stone somewhere I would stand on it and fall over! It was such an emotional day, and the crowds were cheering and clapping loudly. But then the parade past The Cenotaph was eerily quiet. When the cheering started again, it really got to me, and I shed a few tears."

Lisa, a former Combat Medical Technician in the Royal Army Medical Corps, who is now a Blesma Trustee, added: "It is difficult to put into words how incredible the crowds were and what a humbling experience it was. It felt like I was really part of something military for the first time since leaving Service, which was uplifting, and I was honoured to be part of Blesma."

The day marked the end of a significant Remembrance period for Blesma that featured fundraising



From L: Members Paul Findlay, Hari Budha Magar and Colin Branch

# Welcome



At the end of another busy year, I look back and reflect on some of our Members' outstanding achievements. They range from climbing, rowing, sailing, swimming, running or walking significant distances, breaking records using a wheelchair, snow sports, martial arts, body building, Invictus Games, Paralympic and World Champion successes... the list goes on. These are just the physical endeavours. Other successes have come from less adventurous pursuits, including engagement in the Storytelling and Wellbeing Programme, baking, knitting, swimming with Newfoundland dogs, photography and woodworking.

Many of our Members and supporters have also raised significant amounts through sponsored activities or collecting at local events. For some, their biggest challenge this year may have been adapting to living with limb loss or loss of use of limb; and that in itself is a remarkable achievement. To all of you, well done, thank you for your commitment to Blesma, and I can promise that Blesma will always remain committed to you.

There have been notable changes in how Blesma operates in 2024. For the first time, we have produced a TV advert as part of our legacy campaign. Clearly, any results from this may take years to materialise. However, it has resulted in an increase in downloads and requests for our legacy pack.

This summer, we said goodbye to General Sir Adrian Bradshaw and welcomed our new Chair, Ed Davis, who is already actively engaged and flying the flag for Blesma. In June, we published the new five-year strategy (2024-2029) with the aim of moving from deficit to surplus in the next three-to-four years. We have an extremely positive outlook, with the second half of 2024 seeing a more stable fundraising environment.

Although it may not feel like it, the economy is slowly picking up. What is not in doubt is our ability to continue to deliver support to our Members to enable them to live independent and fulfilling lives. Welfare support is our top priority, followed by outreach activities, both for social integration and to bring Members together as part of the Blesma family.

Finally, please do look at the wide range of activities that Blesma has planned for 2025, including national, international and regional events – and get your name down as soon as you can!

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

**Vivienne Buck CBE**  
Chief Executive



# Newsfeed



The mobility scooters were once again supplied free of charge by Electric Mobility (see p56)

Words: Danny Buckland Photography: Daria Kholodnaya



Falklands veteran and former Bomb Disposal Officer John Phillips



Matthew Southwold (centre) attended with friend Wayne Partridge (left)



Matthew Wood and his partner Heidi Neale-Thomas

from Members and supporters and the now-traditional welcome at a West Ham United football match.

Colin Branch, Head of Welfare Support, along with Members Hari Budha Magar, Paul Findlay and Spencer Bull, attended a Veterans' Breakfast at No. 10 Downing Street hosted by Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer (see picture on p05). "It was a recognition of the sacrifices of our Armed Forces and a chance for the new

**"WHEN YOU ARE 'EYES LEFT' IN FRONT OF SERVING PERSONNEL IT BECOMES TOTALLY QUIET AND VERY POIGNANT"**

Government to hear from veterans and veterans' organisations," said Colin.

"It was a very respectful event and a positive experience for us to showcase what we're doing alongside other military charities. It was good to show Blesma as a significant element of the Armed Forces community, highlight how we help our Members and explain how we can collaborate with others to improve things for the veterans' community."



Award winners Brian McKee (main image) and Andy Allen (insert)

# Double win at Northern Ireland Veterans' Awards

**T**wo Members were recognised at the 2024 Northern Ireland Veterans' Awards ceremony in October. Andy Allen, who lost both legs and was partially blinded by an IED blast in Afghanistan when he was only 19 won the Health & Wellbeing Award for his work in veteran health and wellbeing through his charity; the Andy Allen Veterans Support (AAVS).

Brian McKee, who served in the Ulster Defence Regiment, received the Channing Day Inspiration of the Year Award for embodying the spirit of inspiration and resilience. Brian, whose spine was injured

whilst serving, has given vital support to veterans across Northern Ireland.

Fiona Morrison, Blesma's Northern Ireland Outreach Officer, thanked the Awards for selecting Blesma as this year's charity partner, with the evening raising more than £5,000 in donations.

"It was a privilege to be part of this evening and to witness two of our Members being honoured," said Fiona. "Thanks to everyone involved in making this a success, your generosity has enabled us to exceed our expectations, and your support will undoubtedly make a significant impact."

## MARATHON TRAINING GOING WELL FOR SUSI

Susi Rogers-Hartley has been clocking up the miles for next year's London Marathon. She recently took up distance pushing after an injury forced her to give up para ice hockey shortly after making the GB team.

"That was very disappointing, so I needed to find something else. I've already done a 10-miler and a half marathon," said Susi, who is also a former Paralympic showjumper. "It's great to be able to train with other people because that gives you extra impetus. I thoroughly enjoy the training, and it is very good for my mental health. I'm really looking forward to next year's marathon!"



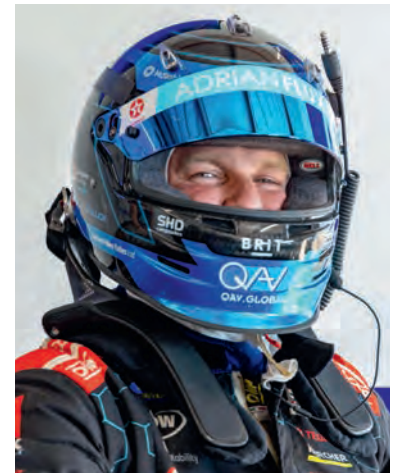
## News in brief

### MEMBER HAS SIGHTS SET ON MAKING CAR RACING HISTORY AT LE MANS 24-HOUR

PAUL FULLICK IS REVVING UP for a tilt at becoming part of the first all-disabled team to enter the legendary Le Mans 24-Hour race.

The 42 year old has just completed a successful season in the British Endurance Championship with podium finishes for Team BRIT, the world's only competitive team of all-disabled racing drivers.

"It's been a very successful season. There is a long way to go, but the



ultimate goal is to become the first all-disabled team at Le Mans," said Paul, who was medically discharged from the Army after a diving accident in 2006 before losing his lower right leg in a 2021 motorcycling accident.

"There is a great sense of family and community among the drivers and staff at Team BRIT," added Paul, who only joined the team two years ago and is now supporting the development of rookie drivers.

"We are here to compete on a level playing field with non-disabled drivers. We're not a charity, we're a race team that depends on the belief of our supporters."

## Warriors go through purple patch at Dragon Boat World Championships

**M**embers Glyn Barrell and Wendy Baker notched up podium performances with the Purple Warriors Dragon Boat team earlier this year, claiming silver in the 2000m race at the Dragon Boat World Championships. The team, created to inspire recovery and rehabilitation among injured veterans, missed out on the gold medal by one second at the event in Ravenna, Italy, earlier this year.

“It was a shame to be so close, but we did really well to get silver at the event, which attracted almost 7,000 competitors,” said Glyn, a former member of the 40th Regiment Royal Artillery. “Purple Warriors is a fantastic club which gives you the opportunity to compete again and be with like-minded people. I was in a dark place until I joined in 2016, so it was pivotal for me. It’s about sharing experiences and banter, and it does an amazing amount for your physical and psychological wellbeing.”

*If you are interested in joining the team, you can find more information at [www.purplewarriors.org](http://www.purplewarriors.org)*



## NoLimits high performance sportswear by Mark Ormrod

Blesma Member and former Royal Marine Mark Ormrod has released a clothing range in collaboration with veteran-owned company ForceWear. The NoLimits range offers the perfect blend of practicality and purpose. Take a look at the full range now:



[www.forcewear.co.uk/collections/mark-ormrod](http://www.forcewear.co.uk/collections/mark-ormrod)





# Surewise ready to deliver hampers this Christmas

**C**harity partner Surewise is gearing up to deliver hampers to Members once again over the festive season. The goodwill mission is part of the company's strong relationship with the Association, which includes a donation of mobility scooters.

"Blesma is close to our hearts, and we are inspired by its Members," said Stuart Bensusan, who founded the social care insurance company with two business partners. "Most of our staff or families have a connection with someone in the military or know someone who has served. Every member of staff wanted to be involved in delivering the hampers to vulnerable or isolated Members last year, and we want to do more this year."

Surewise, based close to Blesma's office in Chelmsford, specialises in insurance for care workers, mobility scooters and wheelchairs. Its underwriter, Sagic, also returns its retained profit to charity.



"We wanted to partner with a charity that allowed us to see what happened to the contributions," added Stuart. "We read *Blesma Magazine* and did some research, and it quickly became obvious that Blesma is a charity dedicated to its members."

Surewise now also organises its own workplace fundraising events for Blesma, as well as putting on a golf day fundraiser that includes Members in the summer. "It is fantastic to meet Blesma Members and see the way they cope with whatever is thrown at them, often with great

humour. We are thrilled to be able to do our bit," said Stuart

Chris Knight, Blesma's Corporate & Regional Fundraising Manager, added: "Our partnership has gone from strength to strength. It's a pleasure to be supported by such a great company who are always looking at how they can engage with us to make a difference for Members. I look forward to our continued partnership."

## News in brief

### EXPRESSING ANGER THROUGH POETRY CAN BE "VERY POWERFUL" SAYS BLESMA WIDOW

Janet Wilkes has compiled her fourth book of inspiring poetry, *The Olibanum Tree*, which is available in selected bookshops now.

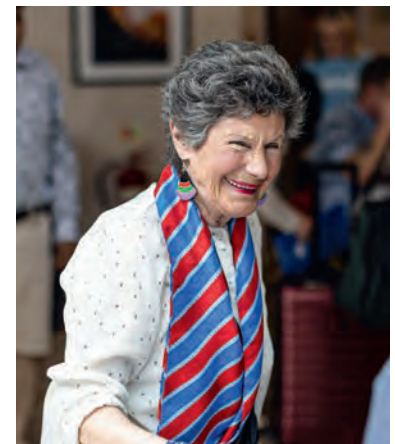
Janet, a Blesma Widow who lives in London, caught the poetry bug after she was introduced to it on a Blesma course four years ago.

"The course was the starting point for me, and I have been developing my poetry through workshops and writing groups ever since," said Janet, whose husband Keith served in the Royal Engineers and The Intelligence Corps.

"Sometimes, the poems come quite quickly and others I have to work on for weeks, but the whole experience is very stimulating. Writing poetry is a wonderful way of recording feelings and emotions, and bringing them to people's attention.

"Poetry isn't just about flowers and sunsets. It is a vehicle for expressing one's thoughts and sometimes one's thoughts are angry, but expressing anger in poetic form can be very powerful!"

***The Olibanum Tree can be ordered directly from Janet by emailing her at [janetwilkes1947@gmail.com](mailto:janetwilkes1947@gmail.com)***





## FOLLOWING IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF OUR D-DAY HEROES

THREE BLESMA SUPPORTERS HAVE walked in the footsteps of D-Day heroes by completing the commemorative Frontline Walk, raising more than £8,250.

Theresa Moorin, Robert Ball and Shaun Briddon made the 100km walk past landmarks such as Sword, Juno, Gold, Omaha and Utah beaches, finishing up at The British Normandy Memorial to pay tribute to the fallen heroes of D-Day.

Blesma teamed up with the Army Benevolent Fund for the event, which was spread across three days in October.

*If you would like to take part in The Frontline Walk in 2025, which will run from 01-05 October, visit [www.blesma.org](http://www.blesma.org)*

## Lottery Community Fund is a huge boost for Wales

**B**lesma is thrilled to announce a generous £20,000 grant that has been awarded by the National Lottery Community Fund – Awards for All Wales. The funding, provided by National Lottery players, will be transformational for Members across Wales over a period of 24 months, starting in 2025.

The support will allow Blesma Wales to expand its Outreach and Social Connection Programme, extending its reach to even more isolated areas across North Wales and beyond.

“Through this funding, we will be able to provide a diverse range of 40 activities aimed at reducing isolation and enhancing social connections,” said BSO Wales & West Tom Hall. “This will include hosting regular lunches, brunches, social activities and Christmas dinners – all of which will offer opportunities for our Members to connect, relax and enjoy quality time together.”

“The funding will truly make a difference in our outreach efforts across Wales. We can now extend our support to Members who may not typically have had the chance to join Blesma events in the past. Our goal is to continue to reach as many people as

possible and offer meaningful connections through these gatherings.”

With the grant, Blesma Wales will bring veterans and their families closer, offering inclusive opportunities for socialising and camaraderie. By the end of 2026, the Association is confident that the gatherings will have made a substantial positive impact, reducing isolation and fostering a sense of belonging.

“Our main focus will be to build a greater presence in North Wales and engage with Members who may have felt isolated,” said Outreach Officer Jason Suller. “We’re committed to ensuring everyone feels part of the Blesma community.”

*For more on what Members in Wales have been up to recently turn to p58*



## ENJOYING THE SIGHTS AT THE ROYAL AIR TATTOO

BLESMA SUPPORTERS WERE TREATED to a high-flying day out at the Royal International Air Tattoo at RAF Fairford in July thanks to aviation and defence specialist company CAE, who donated spaces at the event.

“CAE’s generosity enabled us to further develop relationships with businesses including NRS Healthcare, Corps Security, Kellogg Brown & Root, and Fraser Nash Consultancy,” said Chris Knight, Blesma’s Corporate & Regional Sponsorship Manager.



## MIKE TAKES ON CUMBRIAN WAY TO RAISE FUNDS

MIKE ARMSTRONG HAS completed another countryside walking challenge to raise more than £1,000 for the Association.

The 63-year-old above-knee amputee, who walked the distance of Hadrian's Wall last year, has tackled the 75-mile Cumbrian Way through the rugged Lake District.

"There were some tough stretches where the paths were very uneven, but the scenery was breathtaking and I chose my days so that I was generally walking in good weather," said Mike, who served with the King's Own Royal Border Regiment



TA before suffering an accident in 2002. He split the route from Ulverston to Carlisle into 11 stages, and completed them between July and September, raising £1,169.

"I enjoyed the challenge and am delighted to have raised some funds for Blesma," he added.

## Freak accident puts epic challenge on hold until 2025

**A** plan to sail around Great Britain in 50 days – which was two years in the making – ran into trouble after a freak accident on the second day.

Blesma Members Talan Skeels-Piggins and Neil Baxter, both experienced sailors, had to abandon their detailed itinerary when their 34-foot boat was hit by a wave that sent Neil crashing across the cabin, breaking his hip. A coastguard helicopter was scrambled but, with conditions deteriorating, it had to abort its mission to winch Neil, a below-knee amputee, clear so he could get treatment.

"We had to divert to Torquay with Neil lying in the cabin being bounced about in pain for six hours!" said Talan, a former

Royal Navy fighter controller who was paralysed in 2003. "In Torquay, it took the coastguard team and ambulance crew 90 minutes to get him out of the cabin using a special cliff rescue stretcher."

Neil was later transferred to hospital in Portsmouth while Talan sailed to Falmouth the next day with remaining crewman Mark Layzell to finish the first leg of the planned trip but decided it would not be possible to complete the challenge.

"It was a tough route around the outside of Ireland and the top of Scotland, so we decided it just wouldn't be possible," Talan added. "I'd put a lot of planning into it so it was disappointing, but I'm not deterred and the aim is to try again next year."



## GOT A STORY? GET IN TOUCH!

Have you got a story you'd like to tell? Want some help publicising an event or expedition you're planning? To put your story in the magazine, just get in touch with us at [editor@blesma.org](mailto:editor@blesma.org)

ottobock.

The Next Step in Prosthetic  
Technology is Here and  
Available on The VPP

## Genium X4

Inspired by nature the Genium X4 has been designed to set a new standard of microprocessor knee (MPK) performance.

In addition to the familiar features from the Genium X3, the X4 displays additional functionality including:

**Dynamic Backward Walking** allowing the user to pull heavy objects backwards.

**Start to Walk** making it easier to take small steps when in queues or tight spaces.

**Early Stance Phase Support** giving the user more control when walking on shallow or medium ramps.

**Optimised Ascent** allows the user to walk up hills easier using less energy.

**Intuitive Cycling** enables automatic recognition of cycling and automatically switches off stance resistance.

The latest MPK technology is now available to veterans via the VPP, contact your prosthetist to arrange a fitting or replacement of your current MPK.



For more information on the  
Genium X4 scan the QR code



[www.ottobock.com](http://www.ottobock.com)



## Military base raises funds all year for the Association

**R**AF Valley has presented Blesma with a £3,584 boost from its fundraising during 2023/24. The station, on Anglesey, which is home to the RAF's Mountain Rescue Service and a flight training school, held a number of sponsored sporting and social activities along with regular Mess contributions during the year.

"We choose charities every year and I suggested Blesma for 2023/24," said Padre Mike Hall. "We have some Members locally so we were delighted to raise the profile and raise money to help the work Blesma does."

"The activities varied from bucket collections to sports, and we collected a monthly Mess contribution along with donations from our local industry supporters, which all added to the pot."

Chris Knight, Blesma's Corporate & Regional Fundraising Manager, said: "We really value and appreciate RAF Valley choosing Blesma as one of its charities to support during 2023/24. The funds they have raised are incredible, and it means so much to our Association to be supported by a military base."

## CARBON HAND IS 'BREATHTAKING'

A REVOLUTIONARY CARBON HAND, which has been designed to promote function and strength, is providing a huge boost for Member Lee Mason.

The three-fingered glove contains pressure sensors linked to a power pack and delivers support to improve the grip for everyday tasks such as holding cups and turning door handles, as well as recreational activities such as playing golf and cycling.

Lee, from Scunthorpe, who served with the 2nd Battalion Royal Anglian Regiment, has been able to buy the £9,000 carbon hand thanks to support from Blesma and his former regiment.

"It has been fantastic and is helping with all sorts of things," said Lee, who damaged his dominant left hand and suffered multiple injuries in a motorbike accident 12 years ago. "I can now drive my car in manual and go fishing without having to rely on just one hand."

"I'm not an emotional person, but being able to hold something in my hand again is breathtaking, and it's given me a purpose to carry on battling through. I am the first person in the UK to trial the hand, and the hope is that when people see what it can do and how it can help someone who is struggling, it will become available on the NHS."



## FRIENDS FROM FROME ENJOY FABULOUS FUNDRAISER

Royal Signals Reservist Lizzie Mayo has put her organisational skills to full effect by organising a charity ball for Blesma which raised £1,520. Some 70 guests enjoyed a three-course meal, ceilidh and disco along with an auction and raffle at Orchardleigh House, near Frome, Somerset earlier in the year. "It was a great evening and we are delighted to have raised funds for Blesma," said Lizzie. "My parents and grandparents served in the military, so it was good to be able to put on a charity ball for Blesma."



Words: Danny Buckland

## ↘ BLESMA BRIEFING

# How to navigate winter safely

FROM STAYING SAFE OUTSIDE TO KEEPING UPBEAT INDOORS, BRIAN CHENIER BSO (PROSTHETICS) GIVES HIS TOP TIPS FOR TACKLING THOSE WINTER WOES



**A**s the winter months set in, the crisp air and beautiful landscapes can often be overshadowed by challenges for those who rely on prosthetics, wheelchairs and orthotics. Snowy pavements, icy streets, and wet or damp weather can create obstacles that may pose risks to safety and mobility. However, with proper preparation and awareness, individuals using these aids can navigate winter confidently and safely. Here are some essential tips and strategies to help ease the winter worries.

### PREPARATION IS KEY EQUIPMENT CHECK

Before winter arrives, it is a good idea to carry out a thorough inspection of your equipment.

- **Prosthetics:** Check the fit of your prosthetic limb. Cold weather can lead to changes in limb size, so adjustments may be necessary. Ensure that the components are functioning correctly and that there are no signs of wear. Battery life on microprocessor controlled devices can be an issue in cold temperatures, so regular servicing is essential.
- **Wheelchairs:** Inspect the wheels and tyres for proper inflation and tread. If you use a manual wheelchair, consider switching to winter tyres for better traction. If using a power chair, power add-on or scooter, check that the battery is in good condition and holds a full charge.
- **Orthotics:** Examine your orthotic devices for any signs of wear. Ensure they fit comfortably and correctly, as foot swelling can occur in cold weather.

### MAINTENANCE AND REPAIRS

Make any necessary repairs well ahead of the cold weather setting in. If you notice any issues, contact your prosthetist, orthotist or wheelchair provider for professional maintenance.

### DRESS APPROPRIATELY FOR THE WEATHER LAYERING UP

Dressing in layers is sensible to maintain body heat and comfort. Here's how to layer effectively:

- **Base Layer:** Choose moisture-wicking fabrics that keep sweat away from your skin. This helps prevent chilling, especially if you're active.
- **Insulating Layer:** Choose thermal materials that trap heat without adding bulk. Fleece or wool are good options.
- **Outer Layer:** Wear a waterproof and windproof jacket to protect against rain and snow. Make sure it is long enough to cover your hips.
- **Accessories:** A warm hat and scarf will help retain body heat. Gloves can improve grip while keeping your hands warm. Consider mittens for extra warmth, but ensure they don't hinder your ability to operate your mobility aids.

### USING MOBILITY AIDS SAFELY WALKING WITH PROSTHETICS

If you use a prosthetic, keep the following in mind:

- **Footwear:** Choose shoes with good traction to prevent slipping. You may need to ask your prosthetist to adjust your prosthesis to accommodate a change in footwear.
- **Take Your Time:** Move at a steady pace, especially on uneven or slippery ground. If necessary, consider using a waking aid such as a stick or walking poles.

### USING A WHEELCHAIR

For wheelchair users, safety is paramount:

- **Tyres:** Consider winter-specific tyres for improved traction, and ensure your wheels function smoothly.
- **Brakes:** Test your brakes before heading out. Ensure they engage properly, especially when on inclines or declines.
- **Slow Down:** Icy conditions require a slower approach. Use caution when navigating slopes, and avoid sharp turns that may cause tipping.



**CHECK THE FIT OF YOUR PROSTHETIC LIMB. COLD WEATHER CAN LEAD TO CHANGES IN LIMB SIZE, SO SOME ADJUSTMENT MIGHT BE NECESSARY**



## ORTHOTIC USE

If you wear orthotics, ensure:

- **Proper Fit:** Cold weather can lead to swelling. Check the fit of your orthotics regularly to avoid discomfort, and check the fit in winter footwear as this might be different from the footwear you use in warmer months.
- **Moisture Management:** Keep your orthotic devices dry. If they get wet, dry them thoroughly before putting them back on to prevent skin irritation.

## PLAN YOUR ROUTES

### KNOW YOUR ENVIRONMENT

Familiarise yourself with your surroundings:

- **Accessible Routes:** Plan to use paths that are likely to be cleared of snow and ice. Stick to well-lit, populated areas where assistance is readily available if needed.
- **Public Transport:** Check the accessibility of public transport during winter. Some services may be disrupted by adverse weather conditions so have alternative plans.
- **Monitor Weather Reports:** Be aware of any warnings for severe weather, and adjust your plans accordingly.

## STAY ACTIVE AND HEALTHY

### EXERCISE AND NUTRITION

Maintaining an active lifestyle during winter is crucial for both physical and mental wellbeing:

- **Indoor Activities:** Consider indoor exercises or activities such as swimming, yoga, or adapted fitness classes.

**If you're planning on heading off the beaten track it's always a good idea to let someone know your plans**

“

**MAINTAINING AN ACTIVE LIFESTYLE DURING WINTER IS CRUCIAL FOR BOTH PHYSICAL AND MENTAL WELLBEING**

- **Gentle Stretching:** Incorporate gentle stretching to maintain flexibility and circulation, which is especially important during colder months.
- **Stay Hydrated:** Cold, dry air can be dehydrating. Drink plenty of water, even if you don't feel thirsty.
- **Healthy Eating:** Eat a balanced diet to help boost your immune system during the winter.

## BE PREPARED IN CASE OF AN EMERGENCY CREATE AN EMERGENCY KIT

Being prepared for unexpected situations can make a significant difference:

- **Basic Supplies:** Include items such as a charged mobile phone, first-aid supplies, torch and necessary medication. On longer trips, take food and a flask with a hot drink.
- **Emergency Contacts:** Keep a list of contacts close by in case you need assistance.
- **Share Your Plans:** Inform someone close to you about your plans when heading out. Let them know when you expect to return and share your route if possible.

## COMMUNITY RESOURCES

Many organisations and communities provide resources during winter:

- **Local Support Groups:** Seek out local support groups or organisations focused on disability advocacy. They may offer resources, information or social events that can help you connect with others. Stay in touch with your Blesma Support Officer and Outreach Officer.

## MENTAL WELLBEING

### COMBAT SEASONAL AFFECTIVE DISORDER (SAD)

Winter can lead to feelings of isolation and sadness for many. Here are some tips to boost your mental health:

- **Stay Connected:** Maintain social connections, whether through phone calls, video chats or in-person visits.
- **Light Therapy:** Consider using light therapy lamps designed to alleviate symptoms of SAD, especially if you spend a lot of time indoors.
- **Engage in Hobbies:** Find hobbies that you can enjoy indoors. Keeping your mind engaged can help combat the winter blues.

## CONCLUSION

Winter in the UK presents unique challenges for those using prosthetics, wheelchairs and orthotics. But with the right preparation, knowledge and community support, you can navigate the season safely and confidently.

*For more advice or information on prosthetics, please get in touch with Brian, BSO (Prosthetics) on 07796 715908 or at [bsoprosthetics@blesma.org](mailto:bsoprosthetics@blesma.org). If you would like to get in touch with your Support or Outreach Officer, their contact details can be found on p68*



From left: intrepid explorers Spencer Bull, Colum McGeown and Lamin Manneh (with Paddy Gallagher below)

## “The people made it really special!”

**T**he Blackthorn Rally is an off-road motorsport expedition for military veterans that takes place every year in Africa. As a third-time participant, Spencer Bull thought he had seen it all, but this year’s event in Tanzania brought a whole new level of excitement.

“Picture 26 adventurous souls – including four Blesma members who, between us, have no working legs – taking on the rugged terrain of East Africa in dune buggies,” said Spencer about this year’s rally. “There were so many highlights that will stay with me: Mount Kilimanjaro standing guard over our routes; dancing through the infamous ‘fesh fesh’ dust clouds; close encounters with giraffes and elephants that had us grinning like kids; and meeting lots of local people who all seemed to share our enthusiasm. We were even treated to some fantastic post-rally R&R at a beach resort in Zanzibar.”

Spencer, along with Blesma Members Paddy Gallagher, Lamin Manneh and Colum McGeown drove the buggies roughly 300km a day during the nine-day rally, which took place at the end of September. But the adventure was almost over for Spencer before it had begun.

“On the first evening, my wheelchair decided it had had enough,” said Spencer. “But I was surrounded by an incredible support network, and within 24 hours

I had a replacement and was back in action thanks to my fellow Blesma Members and the exped team’s amazing support.

“None of this would have been possible without Blesma’s funding,” added Spencer. “This was a journey of resilience and overcoming adversity. The event was amazing, but the people made it special. It wasn’t just about incredible landscapes or adrenaline rushes – it was the people who turned challenges into triumphs!”







Lee Spencer holds four rowing world records

# Lee Spencer takes on the Atlantic Ocean – again!

**L**ee Spencer has embarked on yet another epic challenge – rowing the Atlantic with an all-disabled crew for Ukraine. Record-breaking Lee, the first physically disabled person to row solo and unsupported across the Atlantic, has assembled a British-Ukrainian team to tackle the treacherous 3,000-mile journey.

Two wounded Ukrainian veterans have joined him and former Royal Marine Andy Merry, who lives with multiple sclerosis, on the Row4Ukraine mission which set off from Gran Canaria in November.

“We want to raise awareness of the human cost of the war in Ukraine and celebrate the unity and comradeship between Ukrainian and British veterans,” said Lee, who served for 24 years in the Royal Marines, and is the holder of the

non-disabled record for rowing solo and unsupported from Europe to South America.

The crossing to Barbados will take between 40 and 60 days, with the rowers having to eat, sleep and row in two-hour shifts around the clock.

“People talk about how hard it is to row the Atlantic but doing it with a fully disabled crew takes it off the scale,” added Lee, who has four world rowing records. “Just moving on a boat that is rocking from side to side is a challenge! A lot of effort will be needed to contend with whatever the weather throws at us, but we are determined to succeed and raise funds for Ukraine.”

*For further details please visit [www.leespencer.co.uk/row4ukraine](http://www.leespencer.co.uk/row4ukraine)*

## TRIAL WALK TURNS INTO THE REAL THING

DAVE RICHARDSON’S ‘TRIAL’ FOR AN 11K Remembrance route turned into a challenge as he tackled two Lake District fells using crutches to complete the fundraising effort. The Falklands veteran had to contend with awful weather during 14km of ascents and steep downhill, despite having an osseointegration implant removed in the summer.

“I’d had major surgery, but we usually do the 11k Remembrance event so I wanted to give it a try on crutches,” said Dave. “We only went out to see how it would be but kept going even though the weather got worse and the trails kept getting steeper!”



Dave, who was injured in the South Atlantic, and his wife, Diane, tackled the Dodd Summit and Dent Fell over two days, raising funds from fellow walkers en route!

“Lots of people were amazed that injured veterans could do this sort of thing, and some went straight to the Blesma page to donate,” added Dave. “It was great to see the respect they had.”

Dave and Diane are part of the Cumbria Armed Forces & Veterans Breakfast Club, and fellow members have pledged to join the event next year.

## BLESMA FUNDRAISERS SENT TO THE TOWER

Blesma fundraisers have been sent to the Tower of London – but it was all in a good cause to thank them for their support! More than 60 guests were given a tour of the Tower, guided by Yeoman Gaoler Clive Towell, that included witnessing the Ceremony of the Keys and spending time in the private Yeomans’ Club.

“We were delighted to host two evenings at the Tower as a way of saying thank you to our supporters,” said Chris Knight, Blesma’s Corporate & Regional Sponsorship Manager. “It was made possible through our partnership with Kellogg Brown & Root, and the evenings were so successful we will be running another two during 2025.”



Words: Danny Buckland

## Storytelling course offers much more than just learning how to tell a story

**T**he Blesma Storytelling & Wellbeing Programme has entered an exciting phase with a series of new workshops designed specifically for Members' personal, professional and creative development. The sessions, both online and in-person, cover a wide range of creative elements, from writing to sculpture, and are all built around storytelling.

“By storytelling, we don't mean you have to get up in front of people and share stories of injury, illness or trauma,” said Grace Staniland, Director of The Drive Project, which runs the programme. “The sessions are friendly and inclusive, and focus on how we communicate and use storytelling to share knowledge and emotions, and to understand one another's experiences.

“This can be useful for professional development by improving how you communicate with colleagues, clients, or in job interviews. It can also be beneficial in social settings and can help improve confidence and self-esteem.”

The workshops cover presentation skills and bringing authenticity to leadership roles, and range in length from 90 minutes to full days, either online or at venues around the UK. Other sessions include a song-writing workshop where the group will work with a musician and composer to create a song, while an ‘introduction to storytelling’ session in December tapped into seasonal stories that can help unlock the imagination.

“The objective, developed with Blesma, is for Members to work with like-minded people to improve creative skills and



opportunities whilst boosting confidence and self-esteem,” added Grace. “Some of the classes are in the evening to make them available to Members who cannot attend during the day, as we want to make them open to as many Members as possible.

“We've had some great feedback already, with Members saying they were enthused, re-energised and inspired from attending

the workshops, while others said they had gained new perspectives. One Member said it had given them more confidence to talk about their disability, while another said it had helped boost their mental health.”

*To find out more about the storytelling sessions and to book your place, see p71 or email [activities@blesma.org](mailto:activities@blesma.org)*



### IT'S THERAPEUTIC, BUT IT'S NOT THERAPY

**The team who run the storytelling workshops are not therapists, but there could be a benefit to your health, happiness and life satisfaction from taking part**

#### **YOU DON'T NEED A 'HERO STORY'**

We are all made up of many, many stories; injuries, illnesses and recovery are just a few of them – and they might not be the stories

you want to tell. A strong part of the workshops is collaboration and being supported by other Members.

#### **POSITIVE IMPACT**

The workshops have the capacity to help individuals develop both personally and professionally. Recent feedback from attendees highlights a range of benefits across personal, professional, social and creative development.

#### **THE EVENTS ARE FULLY ACCESSIBLE**

All the workshops are fully accessible, and the content for each session is adjusted to meet the bespoke needs of those attending.

#### **SPEND TIME WITH LIKE-MINDED PEOPLE**

The workshops attract Members from around the UK, so it is an opportunity to meet new people and learn about their experiences.



# First female veterans' weekend is big success

**T**he first female veterans' weekend has taken place, giving 10 female Members an opportunity to share experiences and the challenges of life in a safe and relaxing environment.

"It was about relaxing, but it was also about camaraderie and banter, and making and renewing friendships," said Catherine Green, Blesma Outreach Officer North West, who organised the event near Wigan.

The weekend was tinged with poignancy as it was the last event attended by Karen David, who passed away from cancer in November, aged 66. Karen became one of

the country's first female paramedics after leaving the Women's Royal Army Corps.

"Karen was a wonderful person, with such dry wit," said Vanessa Lucas, Blesma Support Officer Midlands. "For her, the weekend was a time to be with like-minded people and with her sister, who attended as her carer. She tried to be involved as much as she could, and we will all miss her.

"The weekend was about getting away, sharing knowledge and talking about issues that were relatable and personal in a safe space. The feedback was excellent, so we are hoping to put on more in the future."

## ANNUAL CHALLENGE WELL SUPPORTED AGAIN

This year's Remembrance 11K challenge raised almost £3,000 for the Association.

"I spent almost 25 years in the Army and have some friends who were injured either during service or after retiring," said former Coldstream Guardsman Steven Ridley, who raised £535. "This is my way of honouring them and supporting a charity that does so much to help veterans."

Blesma Member Jordan Ralphs and his brother Simon raised more than £300. "Blesma has worked wonders for me since I lost my arm and suffered a brain injury. It's only right to try and give a bit back," said Jordan, who served in the RMP.



## News in brief

### A MOUTH-WATERING WEEKEND AWAY

Blesma's first-ever cookery retreat was held in Yorkshire in October.

"The two-day course gave Members and their partners the skills, knowledge and confidence to learn to cook delicious meals," said Member Steve McNeice, who took part in the retreat.

"The first day was all about Italian cuisine; we made minestrone soup from scratch, as well as beef lasagne, mushroom ravioli and tiramisu."

It was the turn of street food on day two – bao buns with BBQ chicken infused with an oriental marinade and an Asian slaw!

"Each evening BSO Steve Burrell held a quiz," said Steve. "We also enjoyed a pastel painting session and had our masterpieces framed to take home! The whole weekend was very enjoyable and a great success."

### FANCY TAKING PART IN A RESEARCH STUDY?

Calling all wannabe astronauts! The University of Sussex is looking for lower limb amputees to take part in a study to determine the effects of microgravity on cardiovascular alterations and executive function.

The university, based in Brighton, is looking for adults to take part in the research study, which will investigate how people with and without unilateral lower limb amputation/s respond to acute microgravity simulation using a head-down tilt table.

The study will require participants to travel to the Physiology Lab at Trafford Centre, University of Sussex, Brighton for one session that will last about 90 minutes.

The participants will receive £20 compensation for taking part.

**For more information contact Snezana Levic on 07982 902294 or at [s.levic@bsms.ac.uk](mailto:s.levic@bsms.ac.uk)**

## Gus tested to the limit on pilgrimage

**G**us O'Leary knew he was taking on a challenge with an 810km pilgrimage across northern Spain, but he needed every ounce of resilience when he was met with serious health issues. The Royal Logistic Corps soldier, who suffered a non-combat injury in Afghanistan that led to the amputation of his right arm and shoulder, suffered a severe cortisol disorder that forced him to abandon the challenge after 12 days.

But the 37 year old returned to complete the landmark *Camino de Santiago* to fulfil a commitment to his faith and personal rehabilitation, and to fundraise for Blesma.

"I've wanted to do it for a while because it is important to my faith, and it was part of my recovery as well as a great way to



**RLC soldier Gus O'Leary completes the 810km Camino de Santiago pilgrimage**

raise money for military charities," said Gus, who has been in the Army for 17 years.

"I did it with my dad, but I started to feel severe fatigue and had to stop. When I got back to the UK, doctors discovered I had Addison's Disease and needed steroid treatment. It was disappointing, but I wanted another crack at it, so I did the military thing of improvising and adapting. We went back and completed it, taking a total of 35 days.

"It was important to finish it as an attestation of faith and as a reminder that no matter how hard things get, you have to keep going."

Gus and his dad, John, raised £11,605, which they split between Blesma and the Defence Medical Rehabilitation Centre.

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# Rescue dog Jake inspires Pawlympics story book

**A** three-legged dog has inspired a heart-warming children's book playfully 'authored' by the dog himself. *JaKe Goes To The Pawlympics* follows the adventures of Jake the dog, who is encouraged by a one-legged crow to follow his dreams to race at the 'Pawlympics'.

The illustrated book, which will be available in January, was devised and written by Jacqui Brown, who based it on Jake, the dog she saved while working for NATO in Kosovo. She has since helped rescue numerous abandoned dogs and cats from the streets.

"People have often said I should write a book about rescuing animals. While I was doing that, I had the idea for a fictional

children's book," said Jacqui, who is donating some of the proceeds of the book to Blesma, Blind Veterans and several animal charities. "Jake was brought into the Army camp where I was working with a leg hanging off and a foot missing. I fell in love with his brown eyes and couldn't put him back on the street. Jake is now 14 and has been with me for the last 11 years.

"The book is a fictional story, but it was inspired by Jake. The aim is to show that anything is possible if you believe in yourself."

*Jake has his own Facebook page at [/JaKeGrowling.co.uk](https://www.facebook.com/JaKeGrowling) and the book can be pre-ordered at [www.troubador.co.uk](http://www.troubador.co.uk)*

## ELITE STRONGMAN SHANE IN QUEST FOR RECORDS

SHANE HENRY HAS POWERED into the Elite Strongman category in his quest to challenge the best and set world records.

The 47-year-old former Royal Navy engineer from Gosport shared the arena with leading athletes at the World's Strongest Disabled Man event in Birmingham in November.

"I didn't have long to prepare, and I was up against some supreme and experienced athletes," said Shane, who had his right leg amputated after being diagnosed



with an advanced cancer in 2019. "I was very nervous, but everyone was really friendly and supportive. It was a huge step up for me, and although I finished last, I don't have a problem with that considering the calibre of the other athletes and the fact that I was the only competitor without a coach. "I learned a lot from competing and the event winner's coach is now interested in taking me on, so I'm looking forward to more progress and hitting some podiums in 2025."

## News in brief

### BLESMA PAIR PLAN TO MAKE WAVES AS THEY TEAM UP FOR 2025 RACING SEASON

Two Members have been invited to compete in the RS Venture Connect Para Sailing World Championships.

Roch Rochford and Lee "Taff" Thomas have been making waves in the RS classification and learning their craft with the Plymouth Youth Sailing Club, which established a programme to encourage veterans onto the water. They both made the world championship qualification levels in separate boats this year but will join forces for the 2025 season.



"Taff is a novice but he has made incredible gains, and we are delighted to have been invited to the world championships in Oman, and will compete in the British and European Championships in Norway before that," says Roch.

"Para sailing is great and accessible in these boats so anyone can give it a go, and I would encourage other Blesma Members to try it out. You can search RYA Sailability in your area. Joff Gill, the RYA Sailability manager, has been so supportive in trying to get veterans into sailing."

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# Activities

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WHETHER IT'S CATCHING UP WITH OLD FRIENDS, MAKING NEW ONES OR HANGING OUT WITH THE FAMILY, THERE'S LOADS TO DO WITH BLESMA IN 2025 – AND IT IS ALL ABSOLUTELY FREE!

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**F**rom glamping in Somerset to skiing in Colorado, cycling in New York to fitness in Spain, with lots of other amazing activities in between, Blesma is giving Members the chance to experience all kinds of activities next year – and they're all free! Take a look at the choices on the next 10 pages and apply online at [www.blesma.org](http://www.blesma.org) or by emailing the Activities Team on [aecal@blesma.org](mailto:aecal@blesma.org).

Please be aware that dates are subject to change and that Members are expected to share a room on each event unless otherwise specified, or the Activities Team have been contacted beforehand with viable reasons. As part of the selection process, you will be required to respond to a confirmation of interest email sent near to the deadline. Failure to respond will result in your placement to the reserve list.

Why not sign up to Blesma's Activities email newsletter to stay up to date with

all the upcoming events and date changes. Please email [events@blesma.org](mailto:events@blesma.org) and ask to be added to the subscription list.

## OPEN WATER SWIMMING

**Location:** UK

**Date:** July (exact dates TBC)

**Application deadline:** 01 March

Take the plunge into cold water swimming; an invigorating activity that refreshes the body and mind. Whether you're new to the experience or are a regular cold-water swimmer, this activity offers a unique opportunity to challenge yourself while reaping the numerous health benefits.

**Who can apply?**

Any Member, but you must be able to swim 1km in 40 minutes.

## GWENNILI TRUST SAILING

**Location:** The Solent

**Date Cruise One:** 19-23 May

**Application deadline:** 01 February

**Date Cruise Two:** 16-20 June

**Application deadline:** 15 February

Take the opportunity to sail the Solent – one of the most desirable sailing locations in the whole of the UK. As a valued crew member, you will be given an introduction to sailing and learn important skills. These are two great chances to experience life on the seas whilst onboard a beautiful yacht.

**Who can apply?**

Any Member. However, please note that the yacht has not been modified, and that there will be steps and ladders onboard that will need to be navigated.

## WATERSPORTS

**Location:** Heron Lake, Staines

**Date:** 06-07 June

**Application deadline:** 01 March

Learn how to water ski, wakeboard and/or paddle – all in the capable hands of Access Adventures; a completely adaptive charity that is designed to deliver life-changing adaptive sports and activities.

**Who can apply?**

Any Member.

## WIDOWS AND SENIORS WEEKS

**Location:** Surrey

**Date: Seniors Week:** 31 March – 04 April

**Widows Week:** 07-11 April

**Application deadline:** 15 January

Join us for a week of relaxation and connection at Warner's newest hotel, The Runnymede on Thames Riverside Retreat. The week is designed to help you unwind and socialise with like-minded individuals, featuring gentle activities and sightseeing throughout the beautiful Surrey area.

**Who can apply?**

Seniors Weeks are open to both Members



Apply online now at [blesma.org](http://blesma.org) or by emailing [eventsca@blesma.org](mailto:eventsca@blesma.org)



## The Members' Weekend and AGM

**Location:** Forest Pines Hotel, Lincolnshire

**Date:** 27-30 June

**Application deadline:** 01 March

Meet up with old friends and make lots of new ones at one of the biggest events in the Blesma calendar. Learn what Members are up to, and have your say on what Blesma should be focusing on. Blesma covers the cost of Ordinary and Associate Members, and their partners or carers.

**Who can apply?**

Open to all Members and partners or carers.



# Activities

## Have fun on the slopes with our wintersports

### INTRO TO WINTERSPORTS

**Location:** Tamworth

**Date One:** 26 March

**Application deadline:** 01 January

**Date Two:** August (exact date TBC)

**Application deadline:** 01 July

Learn to ski with Disabled Ski Sports UK, where you'll have the opportunity to try a variety of different snow sports in the safe environment of the Tamworth SnowDome. These sessions are a great way to discover the sport that suits you best before taking part in our wintersports events. Please note that these introductory sessions are mandatory for anyone who hasn't skied in the last three years.

#### Who can apply?

This activity is open to everyone. If you have had surgery in the past 12 months you will require clearance from your doctor. There is a weight limit of 16 stone. Please note: in general circumstances, we do not allow carers to ski.

### COLORADO SKI SPECTACULAR

**Location:** Breckenridge

**Date:** December (exact dates TBC)

**Application deadline:** 01 July

This annual event run by Disabled Sports USA, is one of the world's biggest and best ski spectaculars for all adaptive wintersports. The perfect week to have fun on the slopes and enjoy all that the ski spectacular has to offer. Monoski, snowboarding, stand-up skiing and three-track are all available.

#### Who can apply?

Most injury types can be catered for on the slopes. 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 be valid for the length of your stay.



### WINTERSPORTS LA PLAGNE 2026

**Location:** La Plagne, France

**Date:** January 2026 (exact dates TBC)

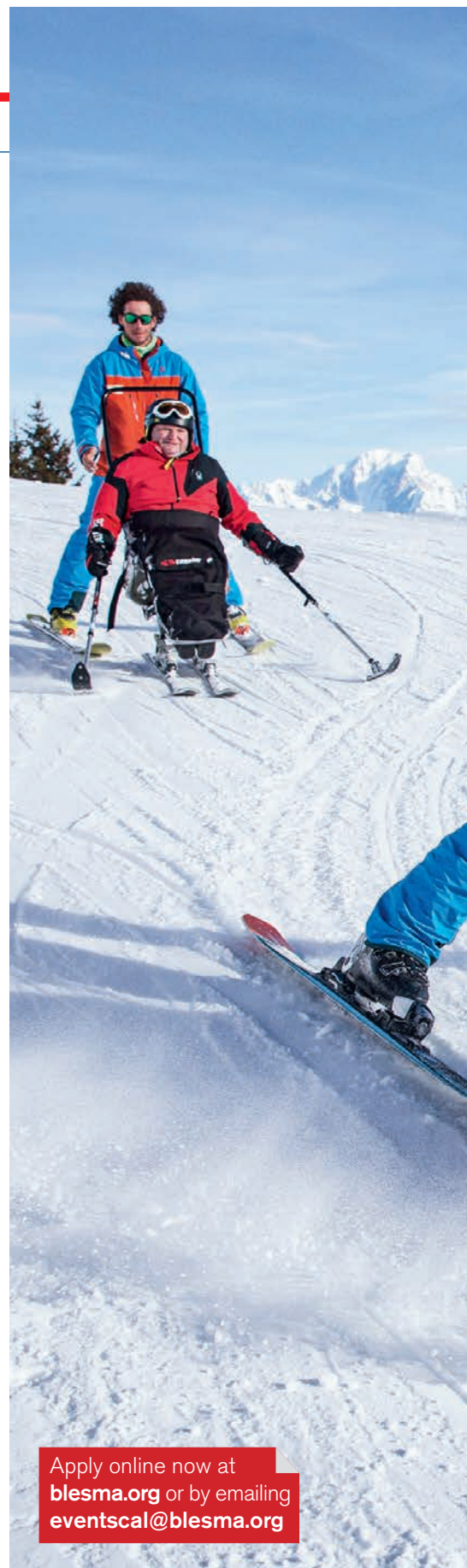
**Application deadline:** 15 August

Our fully adaptive ski week returns to Blesma. Working with adaptive ski instructors, the event will include trying out a variety of adaptive wintersports. This event is open to both beginners and those who are more advanced.

#### Who can apply?

This activity is open to all. Please note: in general circumstances, we do not allow carers to ski.

**Requirements:** Your passport must have an expiry date of at least three months after the day you return home.



Apply online now at  
[blesma.org](https://blesma.org) or by emailing  
[events@blesma.org](mailto:events@blesma.org)





and Widow(er)s. Widows Weeks are for Widows only.

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## **WIDOWS AND SENIORS ACTIVITIES WEEKS**

**Location:** Norfolk

**Date:** September (exact dates TBC)

**Application deadline:** 01 May

Set on the beautiful Norfolk coast, this event offers something for everyone. Whether you're after adventure or relaxation, there are plenty of activities to enjoy. There's always something going on, whether you want to get active, explore nature or relax with fellow Members.

**Who can apply?**

Seniors Activities Weeks are open to Members and Widow(er)s. Widows Activities Weeks are for Widows only.

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## **SRNYC**

**Location:** New York

**Date:** 14-21 July

**Application deadline:** 15 March

A prestigious event in the cycling calendar and a privilege to be invited back year after year. Cycle with the Wounded Warrior Project in and around New York for three days. The event finishes with a huge celebration. This is an absolute must for any passionate cyclist looking for a rewarding challenge.

**Who can apply?**

Any Member who can use some form of adaptive bike, which will be supplied by the Wounded Warrior Project. Please be aware that the weather 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 be valid for the length of your stay.

## CYCLING AND EXPLORE

**Location:** UK (exact location TBC)

**Date:** May (exact dates TBC)

**Application deadline:** 01 February

A five-day UK cycle break that will allow you to immerse yourself in the stunning countryside and all it has to offer. This leisurely cycling adventure is designed for all abilities, focusing on enjoying the ride and the camaraderie of fellow Blesma Members. There will be no challenging inclines or long distances – you'll cycle up to 20 miles per day, ensuring a fun experience for all.

**Who can apply?**

Any Member who owns their own bicycle.

## ADVANCED CYCLE CHALLENGE

**Location:** UK (exact location TBC)

**Date:** September (exact dates TBC)

**Application deadline:** 01 May

Push your limits with our seven-day cycling challenge. Over the course of the week, you'll be able to test yourself with fast-paced cycling, long distances and steep hills, all while enjoying the breathtaking sights and sounds of the English countryside. This is the perfect opportunity to test your levels of endurance and experience the beauty



of the British landscape in a truly exhilarating way.

**Who can apply?**

Advanced cyclists who own their own bike.

## FAMILY GLAMPING WEEKEND

**Location:** TBC

**Date:** October (exact dates TBC)

**Application deadline:** 01 June

Engage with other Members and their families in the great outdoors. Spouses, partners, carers, children, and grandchildren are all welcome.

**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 that whilst there is no minimum age to apply, some activities are restricted to an age limit.

## EASTER ACCESSIBLE GLAMPING WEEKEND

**Location:** Somerset

**Date:** 18-21 April

**Application deadline:** 15 January

Located at Wall Eden Farm in Somerset, this accessible glamping site offers a fantastic experience for the whole family. Members will stay in accessible lodges – each sleeping up to six people – and can enjoy the beautiful surroundings as well as a range of onsite activities, such as 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 that whilst there is no minimum age to apply, some activities are restricted to an age limit.



## A special time to remember others

### REMEMBRANCE WEEKEND

**Location:** London

**Date:** 08-09 November

**Application deadline:** 15 June

The annual Blesma Remembrance Parade at The Cenotaph during Remembrance Weekend is one of the most poignant events in the Blesma calendar. Blesma makes a weekend of the occasion, with a social gathering the evening before and a hearty lunch before departure.

**Who can apply?**

Any Member and their spouse/partner/carer. Members are not expected to share rooms with other Members.



Apply online now at [blesma.org](https://blesma.org) or by emailing [eventsca1@blesma.org](mailto:eventsca1@blesma.org)

## Get fitter and healthier with these great courses

### **FITNESS AND LIFESTYLE COURSE – INTRODUCTION**

**Location:** Midlands

**Date:** May (exact dates TBC)

**Application deadline:** 15 February

Take some time out to learn about what exercise suits you and how to convert to a healthier lifestyle on this UK-based fitness and lifestyle course. You will be able to work with trained PTs, exercise specialists and nutritionists.

#### **Who can apply?**

Suitable for any Member. Please note: this is not a couple's activity.

### **FITNESS AND LIFESTYLE COURSE**

**Location:** Spain

**Date:** 14-22 November

**Application deadline:** 01 July

Take a break and refresh your mind and body. Get moving together, explore the

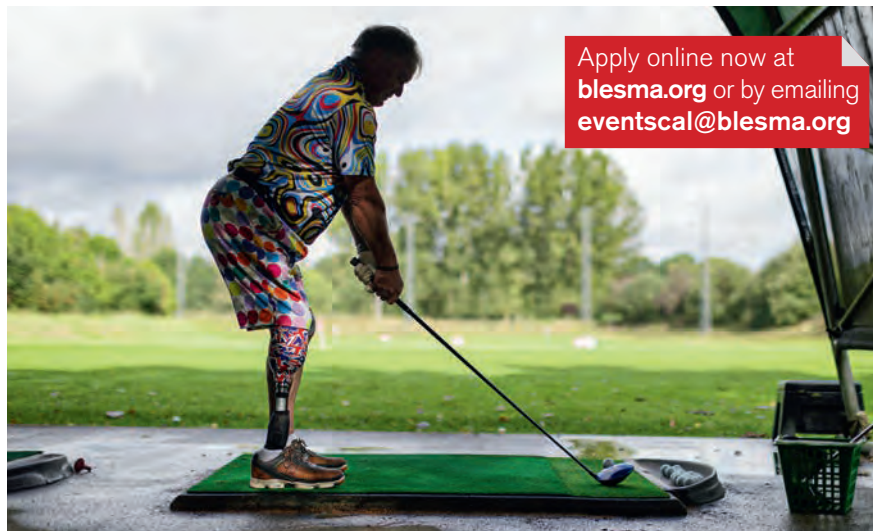
stunning landscapes of Spain and try out new activities. Improve your diet, discover tips for balancing your lifestyle, and enjoy a variety of activities including yoga, pilates, paddleboarding and golf.

#### **Who can apply?**

Suitable for any Member. Please note: this is not a couple's activity.

**Requirements:** You must have at least three months' validity left on your passport from the day you return home.

# Activities



Apply online now at [blesma.org](http://blesma.org) or by emailing [events@blesma.org](mailto:events@blesma.org)

## Put a little excitement into your 2025!

### GOLF UK

**Location:** Berkshire

**Date:** 23-26 May

**Application deadline:** 15 February

Members will enjoy three rounds of golf over three days at De Vere Wokefield Estate in Berkshire. The golf resort has a beautiful parkland layout, featuring streams and lakes. Accommodation will be provided at the hotel and the friendly matches will be open to all.

#### Who can apply?

Any Member with a set of golf clubs. If you have a golf handicap, please state it on your application.

### COLIN WILSON MEMORIAL GOLF DAY

**Location:** Forest Pines Hotel, Lincolnshire

**Date:** 29 June

**Application deadline:** 01 March

Join us for the second golf day in memory of Colin Wilson. Colin was known and loved by many, and the former Royal Green Jacket could often be found on the golf course. Many members had the privilege of playing alongside him. This event will be taking place at Members' Weekend.

#### Who can apply?

Any Member with a set of golf clubs.

### GREEK REGATTA

**Location:** Greece

**Date:** 13-21 September

**Application deadline:** 15 May

This is a chance to learn to sail in the Mediterranean. Beginners will be able to gain the first level of a yachting qualification, whilst 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 a 40ft non-adapted boat with minimal assistance. Members must state if they cannot swim on their application.

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



### FAMILIES ACTIVITIES

**Location:** UK (exact location TBC)

**Date:** August (exact dates TBC)

**Application deadline:** 01 April

An opportunity to spend quality time with your family, enjoying activities like crafts, sports and family-friendly games.

#### 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 that whilst there is no minimum age to apply, some activities are restricted to an age limit.

### COUPLES' WEEKEND LIVERPOOL

**Location:** Liverpool

**Date:** 18-21 July

**Application deadline:** 15 March

Members will enjoy the cultural heritage that Liverpool has to offer. Liverpool has been voted one of the friendliest cities in the UK, 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 and their spouse/partner.

### COOKERY RETREAT

**Location:** East Yorkshire

**Date:** 15-18 August

**Application deadline:** 15 April

An exciting opportunity for Members (and their partners) to try something new. You will take part in cooking classes that will show you how to create healthy, delicious meals that are fun to prepare.

#### Who can apply?

Any Member, with or without their spouse/partner.

### COUPLES' CHRISTMAS MARKETS

**Location:** Copenhagen

**Date:** 05-08 December

**Application deadline:** 01 August

Get into the Christmas spirit with a festive weekend break in Copenhagen. Experience the charm of this vibrant city, where traditional holiday customs blend with the Christmas markets. Soak up the festive atmosphere, relax with your partner and enjoy the company of fellow Blesma couples as you explore the sights, sounds and seasonal cheer of Copenhagen.

#### Who can apply?

Any Member and their spouse/partner.



## Discover the thrill of scuba diving

### TRY DIVES

**Location:** Lord Wandsworth College, Hampshire

**Date:** April, July and August for those selected for the scuba diving exped. (Exact dates TBC)

**Application deadline:** 01 February/01 March

Learn to dive with experienced dive instructors in the safety of dive pools whilst working towards your PADI qualifications. It is mandatory to attend one of these before attending scuba diving in Egypt.

**Who can apply?**

Any Member, subject to medical clearance.

### SCUBA DIVING

**Location:** Sharm El-Sheikh, Egypt

**Date:** 10-19 October

**Application deadline:** 15 May

A great chance to enjoy some of the world's best scuba diving. You can dive for fun or work to pick up diving qualifications. If you've never dived before or need some refresher training, a team of highly qualified instructors will take –you through everything you need to know at a weekend training session prior to the trip to the Red Sea. Complete novices are welcome.

**Who can apply?**

The hotel and boat are both adapted for wheelchair users. However, individuals must be able to get themselves in and out of the water subject to medical clearance.

**Requirements:** You must be able to enter Egypt, and your passport should be valid for six months from the date you arrive.

Apply online now at [blesma.org](https://blesma.org) or by emailing [eventsca@blesma.org](mailto:eventsca@blesma.org)

## Virtual events: No need to leave home

### TAI CHI

**Location:** Virtual

**Date:** 13 Jan – 17 March (10-week course)

**Application deadline:** 02 January

**Date:** 20 Oct – 22 Dec (10-week course)

**Application deadline:** 06 October

Join weekly Tai Chi classes and explore the benefits of this moving meditation. Studies show that Tai Chi improves physical health and fitness, and benefits our brains.

**Who can apply?**

Suitable for all Members regardless of experience or fitness level. No special clothing or equipment is required, but you will need access to a device that allows you to join Google Meet.

### BALANCE AND STABILITY

**Location:** Virtual

**Date:** 02 June – 11 August (10-week course). Please note that there will be no session on 30 June.

**Application deadline:** 14 May

These weekly classes will focus on building physical stability via progressive strength training exercises that are simple to perform.

**Who can apply?**

Suitable for all Members regardless of experience or fitness level. No special clothing or equipment is required, but you will need access to a device that allows you to join Google Meet.



## Hone your photography skills

### PHOTOGRAPHY NORTH

**Location:** Manchester

**Date:** 07-10 April

**Application deadline:** 15 January  
Members will get the opportunity to put their photography skills to the test in a fun environment. They will learn new techniques and be able to expand their creative vision whilst visiting a variety of locations in Manchester city centre and capturing a wide variety of different subjects.

**Who can apply?**

Any Member who owns their own camera, smartphone or tablet.

### PHOTOGRAPHY SOUTH

**Location:** New Forest

**Date:** 08-11 September

**Application deadline:** 01 May  
Members will have the chance to put their photography skills to the test in a relaxed setting. They'll explore new techniques, expand their creative vision, and capture a variety of subjects as they visit locations throughout the New Forest. A great opportunity to learn, experiment and enhance your photography.

**Who can apply?**

Any Member who owns their own camera, smartphone or tablet.



# Activities

**Requirements:** You must have at least three months' validity left on your passport from the day you return home.

## COUPLES' GLAMPING WEEKEND

**Location:** Somerset

**Date:** 26-29 September

**Application deadline:** 01 July

Escape to the great outdoors for a relaxing couples' glamping weekend. You'll be able to experience the perfect blend of comfort and nature while connecting with Blesma couples as you stay in stylish, fully equipped lodges.

**Who can apply?**

Any Member along with their partner or spouse.

## HORSE RIDING UK

**Location:** New Forest

**Date:** 08-11 September

**Application deadline:** 01 May

Spend three days discovering all things cowboy and horsemanship as you ride through the horse county of the UK.

**Who can apply?**

Applicants must have a level of fitness that allows them to ride horses every day. You must have been on an intro to horse riding event or have a history with horses.

**Please note:** The maximum weight limit for this activity is 14 stone.



## DAVE LEWAN MEMORIAL FISHING MATCH

**Location:** Newcastle-under-Lyme

**Date:** June/July (exact dates TBC)

**Application deadline:** 15 March

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

**Who can apply?**

Both beginners and seasoned anglers alike are welcome to attend.

## SPRING ARTS AND CRAFTS WEEK

**Location:** TBC

**Date:** May (exact dates TBC)

**Application deadline:** 01 February

Discover your creative side. You'll have the opportunity to explore a range of hands-on activities in a peaceful and inspiring setting.

**Who can apply?**

This activity is suitable for any Member.

## NRA ADAPTIVE SHOOTING

**Location:** Bisley, Surrey

**Date:** 18-19 June

**Application deadline:** 15 February

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

**Who can apply?**

This activity is suitable for any Member.

## RIDE TO THE WALL

**Location:** Burton upon Trent

**Date:** 03-04 October

**Application deadline:** 01 June

Join the Blesma crew on this annual ride; a poignant and meaningful journey in memory of the fallen. The ride will culminate with a moment of reflection at the National Memorial Arboretum.

**Who can apply?**

Any Member with their own motorcycle.

## WOULD YOU LIKE TO PUT ON AN ACTIVITY?

If so, we'd love to hear from you! The Activities Team are 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](mailto: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 in a safe environment. Is the activity suitable for those with limited mobility? Is the venue accessible and wheelchair friendly? 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.









# MAN'S BEST FRIEND JUST GOT BETTER

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A NUMBER OF BLESMA MEMBERS WERE RECENTLY PULLED SAFELY FROM A CHILLY LAKE IN LEICESTERSHIRE. THIS IS ANYTHING BUT A SHAGGY DOG STORY

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**W**alker, a four-year-old Newfoundland, is intensely focused on his latest vital mission. Unfazed by the cold water and commotion, and oblivious to any risk, his only concern is to bring the people to safety. The giant dog has already plunged into the chilly lake repeatedly to demonstrate his impressive life-saving skills that, combined with his gentle personality traits, provide a reassuring presence to those in 'danger'.

Thankfully for the Blesma Members who are being pulled from the water back to the banks by Walker and the other dogs, this is just a simulation exercise; an interesting day out with rescue dogs, whose swimming abilities have been an asset to fishermen and sailors for centuries.



**Newfoundlands weigh up to 80kg, and their webbed paws and thick, water-resistant coat make them agile in water and relatively immune to the cold. Time to jump in then!**

“It has been an incredible experience and the dogs were simply marvellous,” says Sarah Criddle, Blesma Outreach Officer Midlands, who organised the event in Leicestershire. “A friend of mine who is a paramedic had been to a similar event and said how good it was. I’m always looking for different and interesting things for our Members to try, and this sounded like it would be perfect!”

“I got in touch with Pete Lewin, who runs the events, to find out a bit more. He had never worked with a group like Blesma before, but we discussed what we’d like to do and what the requirements would be, and Pete worked out how the day would run,” says Sarah, who served in the military for 13 years and worked in employment support before joining Blesma.

“On the day, the Members and their carers were all able to get into the water and wait for the dogs to jump in and swim out to them. They were all ‘rescued’ by grabbing onto the dogs’ harnesses and letting the dogs pull them back to the bank. Afterwards, everyone also had the chance to just sit and relax with these super- friendly dogs out of the water. It was a chance to get back to nature, and the wellbeing factor was a really powerful part of the day.”

### **NEWFIES CONNECT WITH PEOPLE**

Seven Blesma Members, along with their carers and family members, made their way to Stanton Lakes in Leicestershire where they were kitted out with wetsuits and briefed by Pete Lewin, a Newfoundland

breeder and trainer, who was supported on the day by a number of volunteers from the paramedics and several police forces.

Pete, who is himself a paramedic, has been organising emotional support swims, water rescue demonstrations and educational visits with his dogs for more than 10 years with the aim of boosting mental health and wellbeing while demonstrating the dogs’ life-saving abilities. Newfoundlands can grow to 28 inches tall and can weigh up to 80kg, and their webbed paws and thick, water-resistant coat make them surprisingly agile in the water and relatively immune to cold temperatures.

“Newfies are renowned for their abilities in the water. They are not authorised to be used for rescue in the UK, but they are used by emergency services in other countries where they have even been known to leap from helicopters to help people in distress in the water!” says Pete. “But they are much more than simply great rescue dogs; all Newfies seem to have incredible personalities that connect with people, and being in their company often has an amazing restorative and uplifting impact.

“On a previous event that we ran with a different group, one particular lady had incredibly low mood and was really struggling with her mental health, but when the dog swam out to her she said it was like the Newfie was looking into her soul. The experience gave her an amazing boost and she is still here today, perhaps in part because of the dogs!”



## RICHARD GILBERT

*Blesma Member and Trustee*

*Richard Gilbert, a former PTI in the RAF who has also served in the Metropolitan Police, loves adrenaline-fuelled sports*

“I thoroughly enjoyed the experience, the whole day was therapeutic and calming,” says Richard. “It was surreal because you just lie in the water while the dogs drag you back to the bank. They seem to manage it with little effort and no noise. It doesn’t seem like a chore for them, so it makes it all very calming. The whole thing just put me in a reflective mood.”

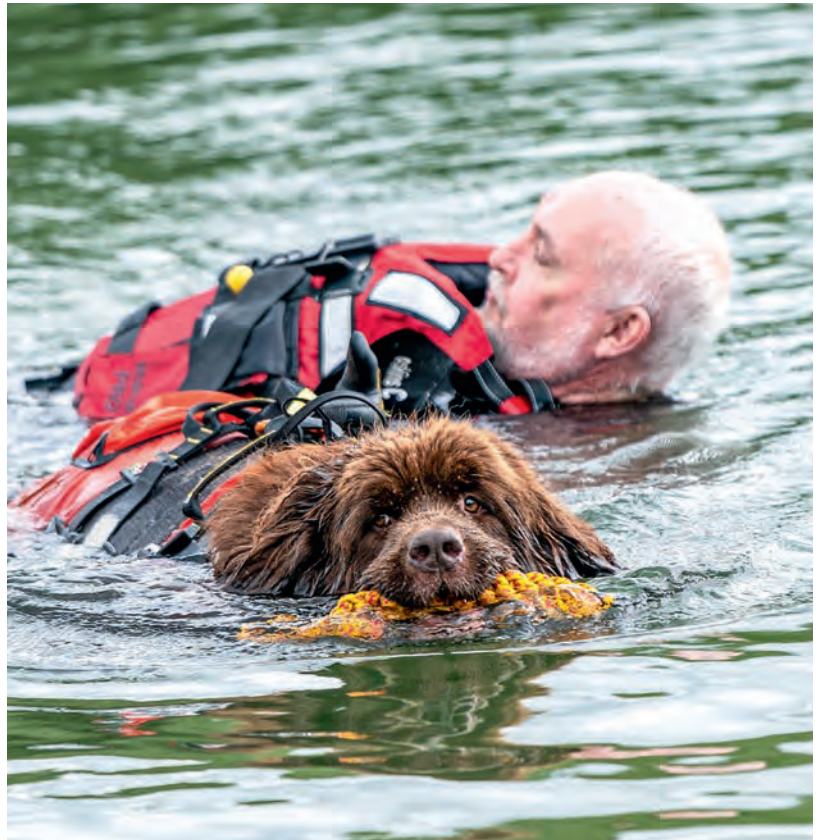
“Pete, who trains the dogs and runs the event, is fantastic. He had never done an event for amputees before so this was a little bit of a learning curve for him as well as for us. But being a paramedic, he has an understanding of the challenges. Jumping into a cold, mossy lake was a complete change from other Blesma activities, but everyone got a lot from it.”

Richard, who is a member of a veterans’ motorbike rehab team, is two years into life as a Blesma Trustee and is part of the drive to ensure the Association is in the best health to fulfil its objectives for Members.

“There are challenges from the financial climate, but we are all working hard to address them,” he says. “Blesma continues to put its Members first, supporting them through life, and part of that is being able to put on incredible activities such as swimming with Newfoundland dogs.”

“It was a great experience and I’m sure it is something that could be repeated so that other Members are able to benefit.”





“These are big dogs, but their characters are 10 times bigger. They just have an incredible ability to calm and uplift people. We’ve had other experiences of people who have been on the brink, really struggling to find any positive feelings about themselves, who have been completely changed by spending time with the dogs. The dogs put their head in your lap and just seem to know when you’re in a bad way.”

**AN AMAZING EXPERIENCE**

One Member who got a lot out of the day was Alan Farr, whose right leg was amputated above the knee two years ago. “Getting into the wetsuits was a bit of a struggle, but there was great banter and everyone just got on with it,” says Alan, who lives in Derbyshire and served for 19 years in the 1st Battalion Prince of

**“THESE ARE BIG DOGS, BUT THEIR CHARACTERS ARE BIGGER. THEY PUT THEIR HEAD IN YOUR LAP AND SEEM TO KNOW WHEN YOU’RE IN A BAD WAY”**

Wales’s Own Regiment of Yorkshire. “I got out in the water, and to have a dog come out to me and give me a ride back was like nothing I’d experienced. It was superb! These dogs are absolutely fantastic. I had actually drifted out quite a way and then called the dog, and he just splashed into the water and swam out to me no trouble. I grabbed hold of his harness and off he went. Amazing!

“I was able to go out into the water three times and thoroughly enjoyed each time. Later, it was good to just sit on the bank and be with the dogs – they were so chilled. You felt secure with them and it was very relaxing; they’re gentle giants!”

Former Royal Marine Chay Coulburt, 35, who was injured on his second tour of Afghanistan, found extra comfort from the event as he was dealing with the loss of his Irish Wolfhound, Frank.

“Frank passed away six months ago, so it was good to be in the water playing with these dogs. They are enormous but really friendly, and I really enjoyed the experience,” says Chay, a single leg amputee from Staffordshire who served two tours in Afghanistan before being injured. “You could just relax as they dragged you through the water. As an ex-Marine, it was good to be in the water, but this was a totally new experience and something I would do again. I was intrigued to try it because I’d not heard of anything like it. I wasn’t sure what to expect, but it was really good and I would have liked to have done more – it’s not every day you get to jump in a lake and get rescued

**“I was intrigued to try it because I’d not heard of anything like it,” says former Marine Chay Coulburt. “I wasn’t sure what to expect – it’s not every day you get rescued by a giant dog!”**



**Pete Lewin has been organising emotional support swims, rescue demonstrations and educational visits with his dogs for 10 years with the aim of boosting mental health**

by a giant dog! These Blesma group experiences are always great as standalone activities, but then there's also the added element of being with other people who have gone through similar situations – many of them more difficult than mine. That definitely helps to put things into perspective.”

### **BIG DOGS MAKING A MASSIVE IMPACT**

After an exhausting day in the lake, Pete is busy drying off the dogs (not an inconsiderable challenge!) and putting them safely back in his van for a well-earned rest. “The Blesma team were incredible,” he says. “It was a pretty cold day, but everyone just got involved and there was great banter between us all. There were no complaints, and it was just inspiring to be around all the Members and their families.

“People ask me if I should be taking people with disabilities out in the water, but why shouldn't I? Why should they not be allowed to do this? When I first started thinking about running these events, we went to a lake with some friends and their son, who has multiple sclerosis. When he got into the

water with the dogs his first words were: ‘I'm free!’ Hopefully, we are making a small difference. It is very simple stuff; swimming with the dogs is such a small thing, but it has a massive impact.

“It is the most humbling thing to see people turn up at the start of the day unsure of what to expect and then coming away hours later having said that it was more than they could have imagined. I loved having the Blesma Members here and would definitely welcome them back.”

Sarah is now looking to organise a repeat event with Pete's Newfies some time in the new year. “It was a fantastic day, something completely different and I'm sure other Members would love to give it a try,” she says. “It gave everyone involved some time to just forget about everything that was going on in their lives and marvel at what these beautiful dogs can do. It was like nothing any of us had experienced before.”

*The Activities Team has published its calendar of events for 2025. Discover what's on offer and find out how to apply for your free place on p22*

**“IT GAVE EVERYONE INVOLVED SOME TIME TO JUST FORGET ABOUT EVERYTHING THAT WAS GOING ON IN THEIR LIVES. IT WAS LIKE NOTHING ANY OF US HAD EXPERIENCED”**



# “EVERY LAST LITTLE THING IS FOCUSED ON THAT JOURNEY”

THREE BLESMA MEMBERS REPRESENTED GREAT BRITAIN AT THIS YEAR'S PARALYMPIC GAMES IN PARIS. WIN OR LOSE, IT WAS THE CULMINATION OF A FOUR-YEAR JOURNEY IN WHICH THEY GAVE THEIR ALL – AND THEN MORE

## STU ROBINSON WHEELCHAIR RUGBY

**S**tu, a former RAF patrol commander, has been an integral figure in Great Britain's wheelchair rugby team for a number of years and helped the squad win gold in Tokyo. But the team narrowly missed out on a medal in Paris after an agonising 50-48 defeat to Australia left them in fourth position.

Stu was introduced to the sport as part of his rehab after he was injured serving in Afghanistan. His vehicle was hit by an IED, resulting in him losing both his legs. Since then, he has competed in the Invictus Games and in European and World Championships for GB, was awarded an MBE in 2022, and was vice-captain of the GB wheelchair rugby team at the Paris Games.

### How different was Paris from Tokyo?

They were both incredible experiences, but there were no crowds in Tokyo because of Covid so it was great to experience the true Paralympics atmosphere and play in front of family and friends. It was obviously a bit of a disappointment not to come away with the prize, but the support from GB fans was amazing. It was a tough defeat to take, particularly as we had beaten them in the group stage, but we didn't execute as well as we could and, at that level, it is down to small margins.

### How intense was your training schedule?

Every four-year cycle we have European and World Championships to target, but my end goal is always the Paralympics. Every time you go in the gym or do video analysis, everything – from what you watch to what you eat – is geared to the Paralympics. If the team performs well at the European Championships you get a spot at the World Championships, and from there you can qualify for the Paralympics, so every last little thing is focused on that journey.

### How do you manage your approach to the Games?

You have to look at the bigger picture and pace yourself. You have to train hard without peaking too early, and you know you're going to be away from friends and family for long periods, so you have to get that balance right. It is about putting the hard yards in, obviously, but it is also about balancing your life.

### What impact have the Paris Paralympics had?

I think they will have a huge influence on people being more active. If you give someone the realisation that there is an active lifestyle to be had no matter what your disability, then it has a really positive effect. You don't have to become a world-class athlete – go for a push in your wheelchair or put on your legs and go for a walk. It's about getting active and being healthier. The increased TV and social media coverage has shown the sport to a wider audience, and more people are giving it a go, which is great. Hopefully, we can capitalise on that in the coming years.

### What was the Paris experience like for you?

There was still a week of competition left when we finished, so I was fortunate to be able to stick around and watch some of the other sports. It was incredible, and I'm proud to have been a part of it.

### What are your future plans?

A family holiday, for sure. Then it will be time to reassess and decide what the future holds for me as an athlete. The options after I finish playing rugby are massive, but it is time to take a step back and enjoy a bit of life rather than constantly training, doing video analysis and watching what I eat. In the back of my mind, I will be back in the gym very soon, but for now, I'm just taking it easy and enjoying family life.





**“IT WAS A TOUGH DEFEAT TO TAKE, PARTICULARLY AS WE HAD BEATEN THEM IN THE GROUP STAGE”**





## JACO VAN GASS TRACK CYCLING

**F**ormer paratrooper Jaco emulated his Tokyo performance by picking up a brace of gold medals in Paris, with success in the men's C3 3,000m individual pursuit and the C1-5 750m mixed team sprint. He also won bronze in the C1-C3 1,000m time trial. Jaco was injured by a rocket propelled grenade in a fire in Afghanistan in 2009 that resulted in extensive injuries, including him losing his left arm at the elbow. He became a downhill skier and was part of the team of wounded soldiers who trekked unsupported to the North Pole alongside Prince Harry before he started his elite cycling career with gold at the 2014 Invictus Games. Jaco, who is 38, was awarded an MBE in 2022.

### Has life calmed down a little since Paris?

It's nice to be less hectic and have time to recover. Every athlete looks forward to the Paralympics, and Paris was amazing. We were pretty much in a Covid bubble 24/7 in Tokyo, so to be able to mingle with other athletes and not have to do a Covid test every morning was fantastic.

### What was it like to race across the line to get gold?

It is quite hard to explain. There was a huge sense of relief, to be honest. There is so much focus and hard work in the build-up, and you can only do what you can do on the day. Anyone can have an off day, but I had trained and prepared well, so there was a great sense of joy when I won. I was just elated. It took a lot of pressure off my shoulders and meant I could enjoy the other events. I'm very proud of what I've achieved.

### What was your highlight of the Games?

Having my wife, members of our family and friends being able to attend and watch me compete was

**“I LEFT THE MILITARY NOT KNOWING WHAT TO DO. SUDDENLY, I HAD THIS AMBITION AND A CLEAR GOAL TO AIM FOR”**

something very special. Every athlete works towards performing at the highest level at the Paralympics, and to have people there supporting me meant so much. Paris did an amazing job of hosting the Games and went into so much detail. The velodrome was full and there were big shows before the start of every session with pumping music, so the atmosphere was fantastic. It was all just a great experience.

### What were the facilities like?

It was very well set up for both athletes and spectators. As athletes, we were comfortable and had everything we needed, while it was easy for fans to get to their seats and see the events. It was a very well-run Games.

### What do the Games mean to the disabled community?

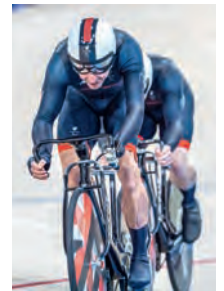
They are inspiring, and I'm a prime example of that. I had the amazing opportunity of being a torch bearer for London 2012, and I watched a few events that inspired me and drove me to become a Paralympian. Eventually, eight-to-12 years down the line, I made it. So, if we are talking about the broad spectrum, then the impact is huge. I left the military not knowing what to do or where to go, and suddenly I had this ambition and a clear goal to aim for. If we can inspire people to be more active and take up sports then that is amazing.

### What role has Blesma played in your many sporting successes over the years?

I've taken part in some Blesma events and activities over the years, but I'd never reached out for support until this year. The Association supported me with finance towards a bike for the road race which was very important for me – that support was huge!

### What's next for you?

I'm still in recovery mode, so I'm taking time to enjoy the moment. I'm attending some functions and speaking at some events, and I've definitely got my sights fixed on more bike adventures. Fellow Blesma Member Stuart Croxford and I are hoping to become the first disabled team to complete the *Epic* mountain bike series. We have completed two of the four events so just need one more to be classed as 'Legends' – no other disabled team has managed that, so it is something I aim to focus on.



**Below left: Jaco (middle) celebrates in the velodrome with fellow mixed team sprint gold medallists Kadeena Cox and Jody Cundy**

## GREGG STEVENSON MIXED DOUBLES SCULLS



**“About 15 minutes before the final, it dawned on me what was at stake. I had to go out there and hammer it, and if that wasn’t enough then so be it,” says Gregg of the final**

**F**ormer Royal Engineers Commando Gregg Stevenson won gold in the PR2 mixed doubles sculls alongside rowing partner Lauren Rowles in one of the most dramatic finals at the Vaires-sur-Marne Nautical Stadium. Gregg, who lost both his legs when an IED detonated during a patrol in Afghanistan, had to wait a long time for his shot at Paralympic gold after narrowly missing out on qualification for the Tokyo Games. But, at 39 years of age, the veteran who worked as a mental health practitioner with Op COURAGE and has a Master’s degree in psychology, seized the moment.

### How tough was it to make the GB squad for Paris?

I failed to make the Tokyo team because I developed a bone spur and needed an operation. I thought that was my chance gone to be honest, but I kept training and out of the blue got a call from Lauren, who had already won two Paralympic golds. She needed to find a new partner, and because I had never stopped training I was at the right level to really push for the place. We went about becoming one of the top five boats at the World Championships to ensure we made it to Paris, and we set a world record on the way.

### What was it like lining up for a Paralympic final at last?

About 15 minutes before the final, it dawned on me what was at stake. We were number one seeds and hot favourites, but there was that thought of: *what if a strap breaks or a blade comes undone?* There are a million things that could happen! I realised the only things I could control were the controllables – it sounds cheesy, but that’s how it is. I had to go out there and hammer it, and if that wasn’t enough then so be it.

### But the Chinese crew took a commanding lead...

They went off really quickly, but I’d trained physically and psychologically for that moment, so although it would have been easy to panic, we didn’t. The commentators had given up on us at one point, but we were composed. We were doing everything right and moving well. We put in a big push with 500m to go, and they had gone out too quickly so we were able to come back. We had resisted getting involved in a fight earlier in the race and that paid off, so we were able to row past them and win gold!

### What were your feelings after the win?

It was an unreal experience after all the effort Lauren, myself and the GB team had put in. But it was also so rewarding to have my family there and share it with them. The kids had been without their dad for much of the year, so for them to experience that tight race in an incredible atmosphere with 10,000 spectators was amazing. It was probably tougher for them seeing the Chinese team so far in front – it was easier in the boat because we knew we were working to a plan.

### What was the whole Paris experience like?

It was brilliant, and I got to meet up with Stu, Jaco and other athletes. Paris embraced the Games; the whole city was invested. It was good that there was a big push to emphasise that it was a competition and not just about participation. Fans bought tickets to see competitions, to see athletes, not people taking part. Sometimes, I think disability sport gets a kind of ‘well done for trying’ response, but we are about pushing performance and setting world records, and the crowds came for that drama. The closing ceremony was incredible, too – it was lashing down with rain, but everybody embraced it and celebrated.

### Are you tempted to go again for Los Angeles in 2028?

I’ve retired now. There’s a huge part of me that would love to carry on, but I’ve turned 40 and Paris was a last opportunity for me. I always said it was a smash-and-grab to try and achieve something incredible. I feel so fortunate to have been given the opportunity to do that. I’ve been reflecting quite a bit – I felt like a bit of a failure for being medically discharged, even though everybody has always told me to get over it, and I felt the same missing out on Tokyo when I was setting records and was in great shape. It felt like I would be the nearly man, so it was great to break through that barrier!

### What are your future plans?

I’m studying for a PhD at Manchester Met on health inequalities and using physical exercise to treat chronic conditions – I want to do something to help. For two years after injury, I was smoking and drinking. I had a sedentary lifestyle and was stuck in a pain cycle, so I can understand how people find themselves in these situations. I want to make a difference.





# Blesma goes glamping

AN EVER-INCREASING NUMBER OF BLESMA ACTIVITIES ARE INVOLVING MEMBERS' FAMILIES. THE BENEFITS FOR EVERYONE ARE HUGE AS BOTH INDIVIDUAL SUPPORT NETWORKS AND THE WIDER BLESMA COMMUNITY GO FROM STRENGTH TO STRENGTH

**T**here was magic in the air as Blesma's annual glamping trip cast a spell on Members and their families in August. The five-day event had all the captivating ingredients of fun and adventure that meant the kids were entertained while the parents relaxed and got to know each other.

Trips to the Harry Potter train ride, Harry Potter castle and to a working farm, as well as a chance to feed seals at a harbour were the main attractions of the fun-packed trip which gave both Members and their immediate families

a great opportunity to get to know fellow veterans and like-minded individuals.

"It was an amazing week away and everyone really enjoyed it," says Colin Branch, Blesma's Head of Welfare Support, who led the trip and attended with his family. "There was something for everyone to do – children and adults alike – and everyone was really relaxed.

"The best thing about it was seeing all the families getting on and having a great time. The kids really loved it, and the adults could spend time with people who have been through similar life experiences. We took all sorts of games and activities along

with us, but the children also made up their own – they were running around and having fun from the very first minute. We are all of the opinion that family comes first, and it didn't matter what rank or role anyone had held in the Forces because we were all the same with the same outlook.

"The whole week went really well and, as you can imagine, there was loads of banter and camaraderie which made it really easy."

Five Blesma families arrived at the glamping centre in Berwick-upon-Tweed, Northumbria, to be met with





pristine accessible en-suite pods, with a BBQ area for evening get-togethers.

Everyone quickly settled in and used the centre as a base for visits, which included the star attraction – a trip to Alnwick Castle, which was used as Hogwarts in two *Harry Potter* films and has also starred in a string of other movies, such as the period dramas *Robin Hood*, *Prince of Thieves* and *Elizabeth*.

“We had a movie tour of the castle and a flying broomstick experience, we played crazy golf and the children got to hunt out stuffed toy rats that had been hidden by the current Duchess,” adds Colin, who was accompanied on the trip by his wife, Karie, and 13-year-old son, Layton.

“Layton didn’t know what to expect, but he had an amazing time. The younger kids were jumping on him, and they were all playing and running around the glamping

**“The kids just loved the whole experience and saw it as a holiday. By the end of the week they were playing with each other like a big family,” says former Royal Artillery gunner Lee Warburton**

site. It was wonderful to see both adults and children gelling together. On some campsites you see families keeping to themselves, but not here. That was because of the commonality of Blesma – all the kids’ dads are amputees.”

Lee Warburton, a former Royal Artillery gunner, attended with his fiancée Destanie and two young children. The fire pit in front of his pod became the focal point for the evening get-togethers.

“Most evenings we just sat around, talking and having a beer or a brew. The kids had the run of the place, but we could always see them. They had a great time,”

says Lee, 28, from Blackpool. “There was so much to do, and it was great for Destanie because it gave her the chance to meet other Members and their families, and understand more about the struggles we all face.

“I don’t really get involved in the veteran community locally, so it was nice for her to see a different side of me – the banter and everything. She really enjoyed being with the other amputees and their wives.

“I’m quite new to Blesma so it was great to be able to speak to guys with more experience about how to cope with different issues. Everyone was happy to chat, and you get the sort of vital advice that you can’t get from a Limb Centre or your doctor, who don’t have the time or the depth of understanding. That is one of the brilliant things about Blesma.

“And the kids just loved the whole experience and saw it as a holiday. They wanted to stay up late every night and get up early every morning. Colin [Branch] is a great bloke and organised it brilliantly, and his lad Layton was fantastic – by the end of the week all the kids were playing with each other like a big family.”

**“It offered the perfect balance; it was great to meet other families but we also had our own space”**





Jack, who attended with his wife, Jane, and their seven-year-old daughter, agrees. "It was a mega time for all of us and Colin was excellent, making everything go smoothly," he says. "He went above and beyond to make sure everyone's needs were catered for."

Jack, a below-knee amputee, joined the Army at the age of 18 and served for a number of years before a service injury eventually led to him leaving the military.

"The week was great because a lot of the children were around our daughter's age, and the whole format meant that they got talking and playing quite early on and really bonded," adds Jack. "The first evening brought all the adults together and that gave us the chance to introduce ourselves and get to know each other a bit, while the children were able to go off and play in a safe environment."

"There was loads to do and it was great to be part of the group, but you could also have time on your own, go off and come back together in the evening. Our daughter absolutely loved it, made lots of friends and wants to go back next year. Not only



**The week was organised so the families could all socialise as a group, but also had plenty of space to do their own thing**

that, but Jane and a couple of the other partners have been in contact since the trip so friendships are starting to be made. And seeing the children having such a good time was great for everyone."

This was Jane's first event with Blesma, and it ticked all the boxes. "It was really good and just what we needed as a family. It offered the perfect balance because it was great to meet other families, but we also had our own space. How the site was set up and how Blesma organised the week struck the perfect balance," she says. "We got along with all the other families really well, and our daughter had a great time – there were lots of other children there and they all just had loads of fun. When your children are happy, you're happy!"

"And it was nice to go out with the other families. It was good for Jack to meet up with fellow veterans too, because we don't normally see other Forces families. We are quite busy normally, so it was a lovely break for all of us."

**You can sign up for next year's glamping trip now. Just check out the dates and relevant information on p22**

Lexi Chambers tackles yet another climb on her John o'Groats to Land's End challenge



# “ACHIEVING DREAMS IS POSSIBLE”

SINCE SHE DECIDED TO HAVE HER LEG AMPUTATED IN 2019, LEXI CHAMBERS HAS BEEN ON A LONG JOURNEY. BUT YOU CAN'T HELP THINKING THAT THIS IS JUST THE BEGINNING

**T**urning the daunting into the achievable is what Lexi Chambers does best, and the five-time Guinness World Record holder has just gone to even greater lengths by propelling her standard wheelchair the length of Britain! For the whole of September and into October, the former Royal Signals soldier pushed her wheelchair almost 1,000 miles from John o’Groats to Land’s End to show what can be achieved with everyday equipment and to inspire people to take

the first turn of the wheel towards greater independence and wellbeing.

The 45 year old, who already held four world records for challenges using a non-sports wheelchair, faced long days and huge, sinew-straining climbs that would challenge professional cyclists as she completed at least a marathon for 36 days out of the 45-day challenge.

Lexi, who has Complex Regional Pain Syndrome (CRPS) and fibromyalgia, and had her left leg amputated below the knee in 2019, consumed 6,000-calories a day to fuel her Herculean efforts to change





perceptions of disability and to raise funds for charity.

“It was very tough at times, and I had to push myself up a number of excruciating climbs knowing that any slip could send me hurtling back down to the bottom!” says Lexi. “The whole experience was quite isolating, but it was something I’ve wanted to accomplish ever since I decided to have my leg amputated, and there was never a moment when I remotely thought about quitting. And the good times will live long in my memory; people cheered as I went past, and cars and lorries beeped their support. Then, as I got to the villages near where I live, hundreds of schoolchildren came out to greet me, and people came out of the shops to line the route. It was so surreal and really humbling.”

“It is a great personal achievement but more importantly it sends out a message that you don’t need loads of equipment to get active. You can just get out there and do something. It doesn’t have to be a big challenge, but if this inspires people to do more and to be more independent then the hard miles will have been well worth it.”

Lexi has been living with debilitating and constant pain for the best part of 20 years. In that time, she has undergone 20 operations, starting with the removal of a toe and culminating in the amputation of her left leg. But none of these interventions has given her a pain-free life.

Before she underwent pioneering TMR surgery more recently, Lexi was taking an ever-increasing cocktail of painkillers and opiates to quell the excruciating pain that was initially caused by hammer toes and which eventually led to CRPS.

#### **LIVING WITH CONSTANT PAIN**

“No-one could really get to the bottom of the CRPS, and you start to wonder if it is all in your head,” says Lexi. “At its worst, I was in constant pain – I’d have burning and stabbing sensations – and I would get so depressed that I wouldn’t go out for months at a time.”

“I loved being in the Army, but I began noticing pain whenever I ran. It was the start of a nightmare. Surgeons broke bones then reset them, cut and lengthened tendons, and performed joint release

surgery. After one operation, I was told that I would be able to run after 12 weeks, but six months later I was still off work and couldn’t walk.”

The pain became so unbearable that Lexi decided her leg should be amputated. But even that didn’t get rid of the CRPS, and after the amputation she had to deal with Phantom Limb Pain as well.

“I still have CRPS, but the pain has reduced a little after I had the pioneering surgery on the nerves in my amputated leg,” says Lexi. “Before that operation, I thought I would never be able to walk again, but it has given me a huge psychological lift and I’m doing things that I never thought would be possible. I had the feeling that my life had almost gone, but suddenly having the possibility of doing the things I love again is amazing.”

One of the things that Lexi loves is to set herself ever more difficult physical challenges. Which is why in September, armed with a set of playlists, gels and protein snacks, and a standard wheelchair with a tracking wheel, she took to the road once again. Her latest achievement has

Over the course of the route, Lexi climbed the equivalent of 1.5 times the height of Everest



very recently been verified by the Guinness Book of Records and, now that has been cleared, it is the fifth time Lexi has written herself into the record books.

“The route was much hillier than I imagined it would be – the trickiest day was going up an 18% incline that also had a 12% camber,” she says. “I got caught in a downpour and there was nowhere to pull

over, so I just had to keep going. I could barely see in front of me and I was having to use my left arm, which is my weakest, to continually cope with the camber.

“Pushing a wheelchair in the wet can be dangerous as your hands can slip and it would have been easy to roll back down. There were lots of other big hills to get over, and we worked out that I climbed

the height of Mount Everest one-and-a-half times. The entire route worked out at a ratio of five uphill to one downhill!

“I encountered all sorts of surfaces as we had to avoid the busier roads for safety. One road had a crumbling surface that was very rocky, and at times I was barely able to move. On one day, in Cumbria, I had to deal with eight solid hours of inclines that ranged from between 12% and 20%. It was so exhausting, but there was nothing else to do but carry on.”

Lexi was backed by a support vehicle and stayed at guest houses, flats and hotels along the way. She pre-weighed portions of muesli and granola for breakfast but then had to grab food in the evening wherever she was staying.

“The logistics were quite tough as some of the places we stayed in were an hour from the finish line, and in some places we had to stay in accommodation that was up several flights of stairs, which made life a bit difficult after a day of wheeling! But the team and my partner, who was there every day for the first three weeks, were fantastic.”

## LEXI'S EXPEDITIONS: THE FACTS

### GUINNESS WORLD RECORDS

#### FASTEST HALF MARATHON

using an everyday wheelchair (female)

#### FASTEST MARATHON

using an everyday wheelchair (female)

#### FURTHEST DISTANCE IN 12 HOURS

using an everyday wheelchair (female)

#### FASTEST HALF MARATHON (AGAIN!)

using an everyday wheelchair (female)

#### FASTEST JOURNEY FROM

#### JOHN O'GROATS TO LAND'S END

using an everyday wheelchair

### LEXI'S JOHN O'GROATS TO LAND'S END CHALLENGE IN NUMBERS

**36** Days wheeled

**45** Days of challenge (due to visiting rugby clubs along the way)

**18** Clubs visited

**907** Distance travelled (miles)

**48** Furthest distance in one day (km)

**44,350** Ft climbed. That is 1.5 times the height of Mount Everest!

**101,154** Calories burned

**127** (bpm) Average heart rate



Lexi's playlists, which had helped her through her other record-breaking events (see p53), were an integral part of the mission, with upbeat tracks and the movie themes from *Rocky* and *Gladiator* helping her conquer the toughest gradients.

"It was something that helped me keep my arms moving when they didn't want to!" she says. "The one thing I found incredibly difficult, and which was totally unexpected, was the sheer isolation that I felt. The support crew were together and focused on tasks such as the huge amount of recording and paperwork needed for the Guinness Book of Records. They were doing their job and I was doing mine, but strangely there was very little overlap so it often felt really lonely when I was out on the road.

"I also had to deal with the CRPS and fibromyalgia flare ups throughout the challenge, but I had expected that. I had to stop once as it completely floored me, and my energy levels were so low I wasn't sure I would complete the day. But I got through it, and my body was generally ok."

Lexi has already had 20 surgeries and is now scheduled for another operation on the neuromas in her stump.

"The neuromas constantly battle with the CRPS; one sets the other off and vice versa. But unfortunately, there is no cure for CRPS, or any surgery that helps," says Lexi, who is currently relaxing and recovering but is already planning her next challenge – to wheel around all eight of the venues for the 2025 Women's Rugby World Cup in England next August.

"It's great to be the first to do something. I've experienced that feeling a few times now, but this feels like a mind-blowing achievement. I do these challenges in a standard wheelchair to show people you don't need an expensive chair to be active.

"Don't be daunted and don't put barriers there just because you use a wheelchair. You can go out there and your chair will survive it. You can start small and then build your fitness, but the main point is that you will be able to enjoy your life more and be a bit more independent.

"The feedback from this challenge has been great. A little girl with cerebral palsy thought she couldn't do anything in her life but now wants to do something like me. I've also had a few people with CRPS and fibromyalgia message me to ask how I did it and how they could do something, which is so wonderful to hear.

"The ultimate goal was to inspire by demonstrating that despite adversity, achieving dreams is possible."

*Lexi talks about how she deals with living in constant pain at [www.blesma.org](http://www.blesma.org)*

**"I CLIMBED THE HEIGHT OF MOUNT EVEREST ONE-AND-A-HALF TIMES. THE ENTIRE ROUTE WAS A RATIO OF FIVE UPHILL TO ONE DOWNHILL"**

LAND'S  
END  
2024

NEW YORK 3147

JOHN O'GROATS 874

ISLES OF SCILLY 28  
LONGSHIPS LIGHTHOUSE 1½

♥ LEXI CHAMBERS ♥  
END2ENDRUGBYRELAY

Lexi finally reached  
Land's End 45 days –  
and almost 1,000 miles  
– after she set off





# Electric Mobility is proud to support Blesma veterans with mobility scooters at the Remembrance Parade each year



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# Bulletin

## Members dive in the magical Red Sea

*This year's scuba diving trip took place in Egypt in October. Member Kevin Hopper reminisces on an unforgettable time*

**W**ell, what can I say about the Blesma dive trip to Sharm El-Sheikh in October? It was simply amazing! Imagine diving in a tropical fish tank – that's what the Red Sea is like – then imagine adding a Blesma team into this magical mix. Our group had varying degrees of diving ability, ranging from expert to novice, and two qualified as open water divers on the trip (congrats to Wayne McMullan and Dominic Howells).

During the expedition, we had three dives a day on the most beautiful reefs and fantastic wrecks. Diving here is truly a fabulous experience. There were too many 'OMG' moments to list and so many varieties of fish and sea life; lion fish, glass fish, trigger fish, turtles, moray eels, spotted rays, sharks... the list is endless.

We had a mixed bag of physical challenges, various bits missing, some of us using chairs. Everyone had their own story. One of the joys of diving is that it truly is open to all of us; once in the water (and under it!) everyone is equal, and the comradeship and team ethic that quickly formed could not be missed.

It was inspirational to meet so many



people who do not let adversity define them. Some of the experiences discussed were difficult to hear, but to see people being able to share these experiences and express feelings and emotions in a safe environment with new friends was great. I am sure it did us all good.

Diving together and bonding over a few drinks led to new friendships and sharing

of stories – some very personal – as though we had been friends for years.

A big thank you must go to BSO South West Sarah Payne and Member Andy Jepson for the organisation and help. Secondly, a big thank you to the Members who attended and helped make this a truly unforgettable trip.

**Kevin Hopper**

**“Imagine diving in a tropical fish tank – that’s what the Red Sea is like – then add a Blesma team into this magical mix!”**

# Wales & West: Vital financial support and high-profile visits

**T**his autumn has been a busy and varied period for Wales & West, with significant efforts focused on assisting Members as they prepare for the challenges of winter. Concerns about cold weather have led to numerous bathroom adaptations and essential home updates. I sent a letter to all Members and Widows of state pension age, highlighting the importance of checking Pension Credit eligibility and the accompanying benefits, such as free TV licensing and Winter Fuel assistance. This initiative has prompted many calls from Members seeking support with claims and additional guidance.

During this period, I also carried out visits across north and mid-Wales to provide in-person support for Members facing urgent housing issues. For instance, a widow in Conwy, displaced by a devastating house fire, has been living in a caravan with her disabled son for nearly six months while her home is being restored. Thanks to the combined support of Blesma and the RBL, she will finally be back in her home in time for Christmas.

With 58 home visits and stops at Limb Centres, veteran hubs and more, it has been a full and impactful three months.

## NATIONAL LOTTERY COMMUNITY FUNDING AWARDED TO WALES

Wales & West extends a heartfelt thanks to the National Lottery Community Fund – Awards for All Wales for a £20,000 grant over two years (2025/2026). This funding will enable Blesma in Wales to host 40 diverse group activities promoting wellbeing, sports and social inclusion. We aim to reach veterans and their families in remote areas and those facing mobility challenges to broaden our social groups and programmes across Wales. With this funding, Outreach Officer Jason Suller and I plan to host cost-effective gatherings, including lunches, suppers and holiday meet-ups in local community spaces over the next two years. A special thanks to the Blesma Trusts team for the hard work in securing this vital support! You can



Wales & West are encouraging younger families to take part in the regular social lunches

read more about the award and how it will be used to help and support Members in the news story on p10.

## FIRST MINISTER OF WALES VISITS BLESMA IN SWANSEA

In early November, we had the honour of welcoming the First Minister of Wales, Eluned Morgan MS, to the Artificial Limb and Appliance Centre in Swansea.

Coinciding with the Remembrance period, her visit highlighted the partnership between Blesma and the NHS in Wales, as well as the collaborative efforts of the Welsh Government, the NHS and Blesma through the quarterly Prosthetics Forum. With discussions underway about potential changes to limb services in South Wales, the visit underscored support for our Members, especially in maintaining high-quality care for war veterans and service-attributable amputees.

The First Minister met with five Members, including Paul Thomas (top right) a survivor of the 1975 Caterham



Bruce Falkenberg at Swansea Limb Centre with Blesma Chief Executive Vivienne Buck

Arms pub bombing, and Falklands veteran Steve Fisher. Alongside Tom and Jason, they shared their experiences and discussed the ongoing needs of military amputees in Wales. Tom was invited to join the First Minister, Lead Clinical Prosthetist Peter McCarthy, and a Morriston Hospital Executive Board member on a tour of the centre. This visit



**First Minister of Wales Eluned Morgan meets Blesma Member Paul Thomas at the Artificial Limb and Appliance Centre in Swansea**



**Falklands veteran Steve Fisher meets the First Minister of Wales Eluned Morgan**



**Member Jeffrey Porter being measured at Swansea Limb Centre**

was very positive and warmly received, and leaves us optimistic for enhanced support for our Members in the future.

**FAMILY-FRIENDLY OUTREACH AND SOCIAL LUNCHES**

Jason has led a robust schedule of activities over the past three months, welcoming many new Members to our

community. We are encouraging families with younger members to join our social lunches, recognising the importance of reducing isolation for those caring for young ones. The mix of ages has made our gatherings more lively and enjoyable, with one younger Member – a wheelchair user and mother – bringing her baby to a recent lunch in Swansea, lifting spirits

and inspiring others. Grandchildren have also joined these events, adding extra joy and smiles to the gatherings.

Additionally, Jason has recently assisted the Blesma Activities Team with successful golf and cycling events, where Members enjoyed themselves and committed to future participation. Nostalgic moments arose as Members shared memories of the ‘old Blesma’ while expressing their appreciation for the organisation’s current work. Above all, Members continue to seek social inclusion and connections with each other.

**Tom Hall**  
**Support Officer**

**Members who would like to contact Tom or Jason can find their details on p68. Clinicians, professional partners or any other non-Member can contact Tom or refer veterans in Wales & West to Blesma using the Association’s website, [www.blesma.org](http://www.blesma.org), or the Blesma Wales & West Referral Form, which can be supplied on request.**

# Scotland: Curling, canal boating and getting very competitive

**A**utumn was a very busy time for Outreach in Scotland, with many activities taking place right across the country, from fundraising events to online and in-person activities. In collaboration with Scottish Curling, Blesma Members enjoyed a 'come and try' session at Auchenharvie ice rink in Ayrshire. After some excellent instruction from the coaches, it was time for a game. With the aim of getting the stone into the 'house' (the circles on the ice) whilst considering tactics to stop the opposition, it was a challenging match, and we all decided a bit more practice was needed before entering the Winter Paralympics!

## FANTASTIC FUNDRAISING

A huge thank you to those who kindly volunteered to help with the bucket collections at Glasgow Central Station in July and September. The generosity of the local Glaswegians was truly incredible, with an astounding £2,176 having been raised over the two days. As usual, no outreach event would be complete without food, so special thanks must go to Diane Reid for her home baking, which kept us going throughout the day!

## ESCAPE FROM ALCATRAZ

An activity in Dundee saw several brave Members locked in a prison cell, armed with nothing but their problem-solving skills in an attempt to escape within an hour. Working together to tackle the puzzles and riddles, the team were only a few steps away from escaping before the time ran out.

## CRUISING ON THE CANALS AND LOCHS

On what was probably the wettest day of the year, 18 Members stepped aboard *Govan Seagull* and *Barr Seagull*, two accessible canal boats run by the Seagull Trust, for a trip on the Falkirk Wheel. The wheel is the world's only rotating boat lift and a true feat of engineering. It moves vessels up and down 35 metres, linking the Forth and



Enjoying a 'come and try' curling session at the Auchenharvie ice rink in Ayrshire



Members didn't escape from Alcatraz!

Clyde Canal to the Union Canal, using the same power it would take to boil just eight kettles. According to the skipper and his crew, the views from the top of the wheel are incredible on a clear day – suffice to say we didn't see much! However, spirits weren't dampened, and everyone enjoyed their cruise, which included a chance to look around the visitor centre and read about the history of the canals. In typical fashion, the sun made an appearance as we arrived back at the boathouse!



Boating in the sun on the Caledonian Canal

In contrast, Inverness pulled out all the stops for our trip on the Caledonian Canal aboard *Highland Seagull*. The weather was truly stunning and showcased Scotland at its best. Blesma's Director Independence and Wellbeing, Ian Johnson, joined us for the trip, and we tried to convince him outreach activities in Scotland were always like this! The sun shone, t-shirts and sunglasses were the order of the day and we even dined on Marks & Spencer's finest teacakes!



You should have seen the size of the one that got away!



Fundraising at Glasgow Central Station



Kayakers brave the cold at Loch Ore Meadows



The competitive streak in full swing at Top Golf in Glasgow

Our final watery activity for the year involved several intrepid Members taking to the water in sit-on-top kayaks at Loch Ore Meadows. It turned out to be a very relaxing way to spend a few hours, with plenty of opportunity for spotting all sorts of local wildlife, which included some very friendly ducks.

After a brief spell of inclement weather, everyone retired to the café with aching arms for a cup of coffee and a well-earned slice of cake.

**A COMPETITIVE STREAK**

You can imagine the rivalry when a group of Blesma Members go fishing, and a trip to Magiscroft Fishery near Cumbernauld certainly didn't disappoint. After a lively start, the atmosphere soon calmed down as everyone waited for a bite. Before long, cries of 'It was this big!' and 'Mine was bigger but it got away!' could be heard echoing across the lake! A great day out was had by all, and there are further fishing trips planned across the country for 2025.

A similar competitive theme emerged with a trip to Top Golf in Glasgow, where Members took part in some serious (and some less serious!) rounds of golf. Using computer wizardry, points were scored for accuracy and distance by hitting the balls towards various targets. A slightly more eccentric game saw the golf balls turn into *Angry Birds* characters to smash down structures and defeat the pigs. Not your typical game of golf!

**Rachael Kennedy, Outreach Officer**

# Northern Ireland: Collaborations, crafting and community funding

**A**nother year is drawing to a close, and we would like to wish everyone a Merry Christmas, and we look forward to catching up in the new year.

## FUNDRAISING

The Northern Ireland Veterans' Awards Ceremony, which was held on 23 October in Belfast with Blesma as the charity partner, was a remarkable event and a highlight in Blesma's fundraising calendar. The event showcased the dedication and achievements of veterans and reservists across Northern Ireland, and you can read more about this on p07.

It was also a pleasure to visit members of the Masonic Lodge Larne in November. The group raised funds for Blesma over a number of events and presented the Association with a cheque for £1,000.

## AWARDS FOR ALL

Thanks must go to the National Lottery Community Fund – Awards for All Northern Ireland for its generous support of £19,928 in funding to be spent over the next two years. This will deliver a programme of community-based outreach activities to support Members and their families living in Northern Ireland to maintain and improve their overall wellbeing. Outdoor pursuits such as sailing and gliding, creative workshops to learn new skills, and a range of online and at-home activities will bring Members together to gain support from one another, reduce social isolation and loneliness, and contribute positively to mental health and wellbeing.

## HOME VISITS AND OUTREACH

Engaging with Members in their own homes is important to outreach delivery, whether that includes a 'roll and stroll' with a well-behaved dog like Blue (see the picture above) or exploring the 'grow your own' harvest in the vegetable garden. Simply spending time together can start meaningful conversations and connections.



Chris Neeson and his dog, Blue, on a recent visit from Outreach Officer Fiona Morrison

## COLLABORATIVE ACTIVITIES

Working together is key within the region, and we recently spent a great day connecting small groups of Blesma and Blind Veterans members to run a mosaic craft workshop. A big thank you to The Veterans' Champion for Belfast City Council who sponsored our lunch on the day. Also working alongside Disability Sports NI, we enjoyed a day of All Out Trekking in the heart of Gosford Forest Park. Members and their families experienced the thrill

of exploring the forest on adapted quads and we learned to play the Paralympic sport of boccia and realised that it is extremely competitive!

## FAMILY FUN WITH ACTIVITIES

A 'spook-tacular' Halloween craft workshop saw Members create fabric pumpkins in October. Meanwhile, a fantastic half-term family event at Exploris Aquarium and Seal Sanctuary fittingly finished off with a pumpkin-carving competition.



**Outreach Officer Fiona Morrison and Bryan Phillips (front row, second from right) spoke at the Newtownabbey PROBUS Club meeting**



**Blind Veterans and Blesma Members joined up for a mosaic crafting day**



**Paul Lawler laid a Remembrance wreath**

**COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT**

I was joined by Member Bryan Phillips to speak at a Newtownabbey PROBUS Club meeting in September. This was a great opportunity to raise awareness of the Association and the work that it does, and it gave Bryan the chance to share his inspiring story with those who were attending. We were also able to discuss the importance of social groups for providing a sense of camaraderie, mutual support and shared interests.

**REMEMBRANCE DAY**

This year's Remembrance events saw Members visit the NI War Memorial Museum to learn how Northern Ireland was impacted by World War II and to listen to the many personal stories that have been shared with the museum over the years. An online poppy decorative knot workshop added a creative touch. Blesma was also invited by the Whiteabbey Royal British Legion to participate in the Remembrance Day Parade and

Service, giving us the time to commemorate and remember. Member Paul Lawler (above) respectfully laid a wreath on behalf of Blesma at the service.

In 2025, we hope to welcome new ideas from across the region in everything from outreach and fundraising to activities and events.

*Fiona Morrison  
Outreach Officer*

# Regional round-up: Barbecues, best friends and a bit of a boogie

## SOUTH

My goodness, what a year 2024 has been! In my first full year as Outreach Officer South it has been amazing to share so many good times with good people. Aside from the copious amounts of food we have devoured at more than 20 brunches, lunches and afternoon teas, we have visited museums like Milestones Museum and the Army Flying Museum, sailed down the Oxford Canal, tried our hand at golf, bowled our way to a strike or two, got tied up in knots making poppies and sang our way into a smile. And that's just for starters!

Our Blesma families have joined us at visits to Beaulieu Motor Museum and Marwell Zoo, and we will soon be steaming into Christmas on the Watercress Line Heritage Steam Railway with them. One particular personal highlight of the year was accompanying Roy Hayward to the D-Day 80 commemoration in Southsea.

As we head into the festive season, I look forward to celebrating the year and seeing what 2025 brings us! Thank you for all your support.

**Amy Barnes**  
Outreach Officer

## LONDON AND SOUTH EAST

Burnt burgers and 'chargrilled' sausages are a classic on a Bank Holiday. But, in an attempt to upskill and get the tastebuds buzzing, Members from London and South East met at the BBQ Workshop in Kent to take part in their BBQ School. The workshop is owned and run by Jackie and Dave Weight – Jackie is the only non-American and only woman to have won the Jack Daniel's World BBQ Championships!

We turned up on a chilly September morning to be greeted with hot coffee and freshly cooked bacon rolls. Jackie talked through the menu, which included rum-soaked hot salmon, chicken lollipops, atomic buffalo turds (!?) and 'moink' balls (a mixture of pork and beef; hence oink and moo combined). Jackie delivered

a very well-structured course that began with marinating before moving on to chopping, slicing and seasoning as we all got involved preparing the various meats and side dishes.

Jackie adapted the menus and techniques for those Members who needed it, and that allowed everyone to get stuck in. Jackie's husband, Dave, is a former Guardsman, and Jackie was sharp with the humour, so there was plenty of banter during the day. Everything came together

nicely and as planned, with all the food being cooked and ready at the same time, enabling us to tuck in to the fruits – well, meats! – of our labour.

Jackie and Dave were fantastic hosts, and the day enabled Members to come together to learn new skills in a relaxed and fun atmosphere. I have a feeling (or rumbling stomach!) that we may look to return again.

**Steve Burrell**  
Support Officer



Members from London and South East got their teeth into a BBQ course in September



Roy Hayward meets Prince William



Blesma South Widow Joan is 101 years old





## NORTH EAST

Heather Plowright (above left) has been appointed Outreach Officer North East for the next six months. Working closely with Support Officer Christine Landess, she will help support Members in the North East and will deliver an engaging and exciting range of activities, both face to face and online.

“As a dedicated supporter of Blesma, I am thrilled to be part of an organisation that makes such a meaningful impact on the lives of its Members,” said Heather. “My fiancé, Frank, is a Blesma Member, and I am passionate about ensuring Members have access to the best possible experiences and am looking forward to contributing to this incredible cause.

“Frank had his leg amputated in 2017, and we were told then how amazing Blesma was. Since then, we have been on a number of outreach events, including Songs in the Park, Race Day at Doncaster, and the couples’ weekend in Bruges.

“When the opportunity arose to come on board to support Christine, I jumped at the chance. I couldn’t think of anything more rewarding to do. I am really looking forward to getting to know the Members and hearing their stories.”



**Clockwise from far left:  
North East Outreach  
Officer Heather;  
dancing in the North  
East; Al Strudwick  
conquers Pen y Fan**



activities as he can in his area. Over the years, he has raised more than £75,000 for various charities.

Stephen Palin-Campbell lives with Complex Regional Pain Syndrome (CRPS). Living on Dartmoor, he wanted nothing more than to be able to get out to walk his dogs with his wife, Rachel. Blesma has provided Stephen with a scooter so he can do just that. “It felt so good to be out in the open, so I can’t thank you enough for giving me the opportunity to get back out there,” said Stephen.

Former Intelligence Corps soldier Al Strudwick flew the flag for Blesma (literally!) when he climbed to the top of Pen y Fan using a standard-issue wheelchair. Al, a keen wheelchair rugby player who plays for the Celtic Warriors in Cornwall, very nearly lost his life to sepsis, but he has battled back despite some life-changing outcomes and continues to strive to achieve various goals

When it comes to activities, ten-pin bowling is for all ages and abilities as members in Swindon and Plymouth showed recently. The day saw lots of laughter (and a few low scores!) and it was enjoyed by all. Elsewhere, the rain didn’t dampen the spirits when 21 Members and family members came together to watch banger racing, while afternoon tea at the Plymouth Dome proved to be a very stark contrast!

**Gordon Clark  
Outreach Officer**

Elsewhere in the North East, Christine (BSO) was invited to a cheque presentation evening to receive a donation of more than £1,000 which was raised by members of the Houghton Rock and Roll Dancers. The group in County Durham fundraise for different charities every year, collecting donations at their regular dance evenings and events.

Long-term member of the group, Ron Wilson, described how he and his partner had chatted to a Blesma Member at an event in Newcastle. They had been so impressed to hear of the life-long support Blesma provides that he nominated the Association to be their charity of the year.

On a fabulous evening in October Christine, along with Members Anthony Makin and Steve and Clare Evans, gratefully received the generous donation and enjoyed the wonderful music, dancing, outfits and entertainment provided by the Houghton Rock and Roll Dancers.

**Heather Plowright and Christine Landess**

## SOUTH WEST

Bob Norbury, an ex-Para and amputee, has raised £2,000 for Blesma in conjunction with his local village shop. He is a staunch Blesma supporter and attends as many



**Strike time in the South West**

# News from the Branches: What's been going on near you?

## GREAT YARMOUTH & LOWESTOFT BRANCH

Following our visit to the Blesma Memorial Garden at the National Memorial Arboretum in April, our summer activity was an afternoon tea, which took place in August (below). The weather was very kind, so we were able to sit at an outside terrace. We had a great turnout of 23 members and guests, including two new Branch members, Gary and Steve. We also met the new Director Independence & Wellbeing, Ian Johnson, who kindly took time out of his weekend to join us. We also welcomed member Kevin's new assistance dog to the Blesma family.

More recently, the Christmas lunch in Great Yarmouth was a great opportunity to bring everyone together ahead of the season's festivities. We continue to try to attract new members by engaging with our Outreach Officer, Francesca, and welcome any members from the Eastern area who are able to join us. For more information, please contact Bob (chair.yarmouth@blesma.org; 07951 292681) or Helen (secretary.yarmouth@blesma.org; 07766 982904).

### Board/Committee

**Chairman** Philip (Bob) Monkhouse  
**Honorary Secretary** Helen Cullen  
**Honorary Treasurer** Simon Cavie  
**Welfare Officer** Philip (Bob) Monkhouse

We send good wishes to all as we approach the festive season and look forward to more Branch activities in 2025.

**Helen Cullen**  
**Honorary Secretary**

## SUTTON, MERTON & DISTRICT BRANCH

Our Branch is blessed in many ways: we are financially sound due to our fabulous supporters who continue to raise funds for us; our Branch members are stoical, inspirational and a pleasure to meet up with; and we enjoy lunches together after our meetings, which are fun and lively.

Branch member Maurillia Simpson is a member of The Soldiers' Arts Academy Choir, which recorded a song, *Follow*, to mark the opening of the Imperial War Museum's (IWM) new exhibition *War and The Mind*. Maurillia (above) is one of the soloists and has a beautiful voice. To

coincide with the opening of the exhibition, IWM is hosting Conflict Café; a free event that gives people the chance to meet and hear from experts and people with lived experience of war and conflict. The event includes live performances from the choir.

The Royal Hospital Chelsea's Veterans Outreach Programme is another inspiring venture that many of our Branch members regularly attend. Mark Sidwells (see right) recently received an award for his invaluable help with the project. If you are in London, the new Veterans Outreach Centre is open to the public and includes a café and shop.

Elsewhere, former Honorary Secretary Pat Robinson and her husband Joe celebrated their diamond wedding anniversary in September. They received a beautiful card from HM The King and Queen Consort. Pat was instrumental in saving our Branch from closure, and we thank her so much.

We wish to extend our thanks to everyone at Head Office, as well as to our BSO and Outreach Officer, for their continued support and guidance. From everyone in the Branch, we send you very happy Christmas wishes and wish you a healthy and prosperous New Year.

**Annie Mac**  
**Chair**

## NOTTINGHAM BRANCH

The Nottingham Branch continues to flourish, regularly welcoming new members and meeting throughout the year. During 2024, our lunches and meetings have been very well attended, and we have enjoyed our get-togethers and carvery meals in the private function room at The Vale Hotel, Daybrook, Nottingham.

**Our 2025 meetings and lunches will be held on the following dates:**

**11 February** 11.30 meeting/lunch

**11 March** 11.30 AGM/lunch

**13 May** 12.30 lunch only

**08 July** 11.30 meeting/lunch

**09 September** 12.30 lunch only

**11 November** 11.30 meeting/lunch



# Those who have passed away

May they rest in peace

<b>AUGUSTUS JR</b>	Honorary Member	23/08/24
<b>BAILEY SJ</b>	Royal Engineers	18/10/24
<b>BAKER SF</b>	Royal Air Force	25/08/24
<b>BASS JL</b>	Widow	21/08/24
<b>CHANDLER JE</b>	Widow	07/10/24
<b>CLARK B</b>	Royal Marines	19/08/24
<b>COLELLA D</b>	Queen's Royal Irish Hussars	26/09/24
<b>FAITHFULL DF</b>	Widow	15/08/24
<b>FLEMING P</b>	Queen's Royal Lancers	13/10/24
<b>GRIGG AG</b>	Widow	10/10/24
<b>GUY SJ</b>	Widow	01/10/24
<b>HAGON PG</b>	Royal Artillery	02/04/24
<b>HARRIS L</b>	Royal Air Force	18/09/24
<b>HARRISON YA</b>	Widow	08/11/24
<b>HOOD FR</b>	Royal Air Force	29/05/24
<b>JOHNSON M</b>	Widow	11/09/24
<b>LAMBERT D</b>	Widow	13/11/23
<b>MCCABE E</b>	Widow	11/09/24
<b>NEALE MV</b>	Widow	24/09/24
<b>SEYMOUR KCD</b>	Coldstream Guards	14/08/24
<b>TAYLOR M</b>	Widow	31/10/24
<b>THOMPSON BE</b>	Widow	04/11/24
<b>TODD GM</b>	Royal Air Force	27/10/24
<b>WINTER E</b>	Royal Navy	19/04/24



As we go to press, we will once again be holding our Nottingham Branch Christmas lunch at The Orchard Hotel and Restaurant; a venue in the grounds of Nottingham University's Lakeside Campus that we tried for the first time last year.

If you are interested in joining the Branch, you would be made very welcome. If you would like to know more about our activities, contact me on 07794 309927 or [secretary.nottingham@blesma.org](mailto:secretary.nottingham@blesma.org)

**David Ledger**  
Honorary Secretary

## BOURNEMOUTH BRANCH

We had our Autumn meeting at the start of November; it was quite a good turnout and it was nice to see BSO Sarah Payne, who had just returned with the diving team.

November is a time for reflection, when we remember all those who went to war when called upon to do so. It is tradition in Bournemouth War Memorial Homes (BWMH) to hold a service on Armistice Day. We mustered in the memorial garden and held the two minutes silence at 1100. Our new MP attended and laid a wreath from the House of Commons. Zack the four-year-old great-grandson of 'Jack' Sweetzer, a Member who lost a leg after crossing the Rhine in 1944, also laid a wreath. Jack's widow and daughter still live in BWMH. From all of us here in Bournemouth, have a happy Christmas.

**Peter Sherston-Baker**  
Chairman



**Clockwise from top left: Maurillia Simpson; Mark Sidwells (right); and the memorial garden at BWMH**



# Useful contact numbers across the Association

TITLE	NAME	TELEPHONE	EMAIL
<b>BLESMA SUPPORT OFFICERS</b>			
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	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	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	Sarah Payne	M 07741 737563	bsosw@blesma.org
BSO Wales and West	Tom Hall	T 020 8548 7098 M 07780 165085	bsowest@blesma.org
Members Living Overseas	Steven Burrell	T 020 7501 3030 M 07469 242277	bsolse@blesma.org
<b>BLESMA OUTREACH OFFICERS</b>			
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	Sarah Criddle	M 07741845429	outreachmid@blesma.org
Outreach Officer Northern Ireland	Fiona Morrison	M 07741 744617	outreachni@blesma.org
Outreach Officer North East	Heather Plowright	M 07350 364120	outreachne@blesma.org
Outreach Officer North West	Catherine Green	M 07741 846674	outreachnw@blesma.org
Outreach Officer Scotland	Rachel Kennedy	M 07884 695703	outreachscotland@blesma.org
Outreach Officer South	Amy Barnes	M 07435 283102	outreachofficersouth@blesma.org
Outreach Officer South West	Gordon Clark	M 07788 312747	outreachsw@blesma.org
Outreach Officer Wales and West	Jason Suller	M 07741 744141	outreachwest@blesma.org
<b>INDEPENDENCE AND WELLBEING</b>			
Head of Welfare Support	Colin Branch	T 020 8548 7090	hws@blesma.org
Benefits and Social Care Adviser	Liz Watling	T 020 8548 7080	iwabenefits@blesma.org
Grants Executive	Linda Harris	T 020 8548 3516	grantsexecutive@blesma.org
Membership, Branch and Volunteer Network Executive	Debbie Mayne	T 020 8548 7093	mbvexec@blesma.org
Welfare – Direct Line		T 020 8598 9459	
<b>ACTIVITIES</b>			
Head of Activities and Events	Jess March	T 020 8548 3519	activities@blesma.org
Events Coordinator	Clare Wellings	T 020 3954 3021	ae@blesma.org
Events Coordinator	Nicole Findlay	T 020 8548 7097	aelocal@blesma.org
<b>FUNDRAISING</b>			
Head of Fundraising	Anna Scalera	T 020 8548 3517	hf@blesma.org
Community and Events Manager	Abbie-Louise Mills	T 020 8548 7089	communityeventsofficersnr@blesma.org
Corporate & Regional Fundraising Mgr	Chris Knight	M 07774 797318	crfm@blesma.org

TITLE	NAME	TELEPHONE	EMAIL
<b>COMMUNICATIONS</b>			
Digital Media Manager	Nick Tuck	T 01299 896282	digitalmedia@blesma.org
Blesma Magazine			editor@blesma.org
<b>DIRECTORS</b>			
Chief Executive	Vivienne Buck	T 020 8548 3512	ce@blesma.org
Operations Director	Tony Bloomfield	T 020 8548 3513	od@blesma.org
Director Independence and Wellbeing	Ian Johnson	T 07881 308794	diw@blesma.org
Finance and Support Director	Boston Mwense	T 020 8548 3518	fsd@blesma.org
<b>USEFUL CONTACTS</b>			
Main Office		T 020 8590 1124	info@blesma.org

<b>BLESMA BRANCH OFFICIALS</b>			
<b>BOURNEMOUTH BRANCH</b>			
Chair	Peter Sherston-Baker		chair.bournemouth@blesma.org
Secretary	Mary-Jane Sweetzer		Please use Chair's email
Treasurer	Hazel Crofts		treasurer.bournemouth@blesma.org
Welfare Officer	Peter Sherston-Baker		Please use Chair's email
<b>GREAT YARMOUTH AND LOWESTOFT BRANCH</b>			
Chair	Bob Monkhouse		chair.yarmouth@blesma.org
Secretary	Helen Cullen		secretary.yarmouth@blesma.org
Treasurer	Simon Cavie		treasurer.yarmouth@blesma.org
<b>NOTTINGHAM BRANCH</b>			
Chair	Andy Fitzgerald		chair.nottingham@blesma.org
Secretary	Dave Ledger		secretary.nottingham@blesma.org
Treasurer	Keith Meakin		treasurer.nottingham@blesma.org
<b>SUTTON, MERTON &amp; DISTRICT BRANCH</b>			
Chair	Annie MacMillan		chair.sutton@blesma.org
Secretary	Karen Mason		secretary.sutton@blesma.org
Treasurer	Dave Hobson		Use Chair or Secretary at present
Welfare Officer	Gam Gurung		welfare.sutton@blesma.org
<b>SOUTHAMPTON BRANCH</b>			
Chair	David Rowe		chair.southampton@blesma.org
Treasurer and Secretary	Stephen Coltman		secretary.southampton@blesma.org
Welfare Officer	Jacqueline Brodrick		welfare.southampton@blesma.org

## Important information if you are emailing Blesma Branch officials

Anyone emailing a Branch official must use a specific Blesma email address rather than a personal account.

Previously, Members have been sending and receiving personal data in potentially unsecured emails, which has been placing the Association at risk of large penalties. Official Blesma Branch email addresses

have now been established (please see above) which ensure the Association is compliant with General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR).

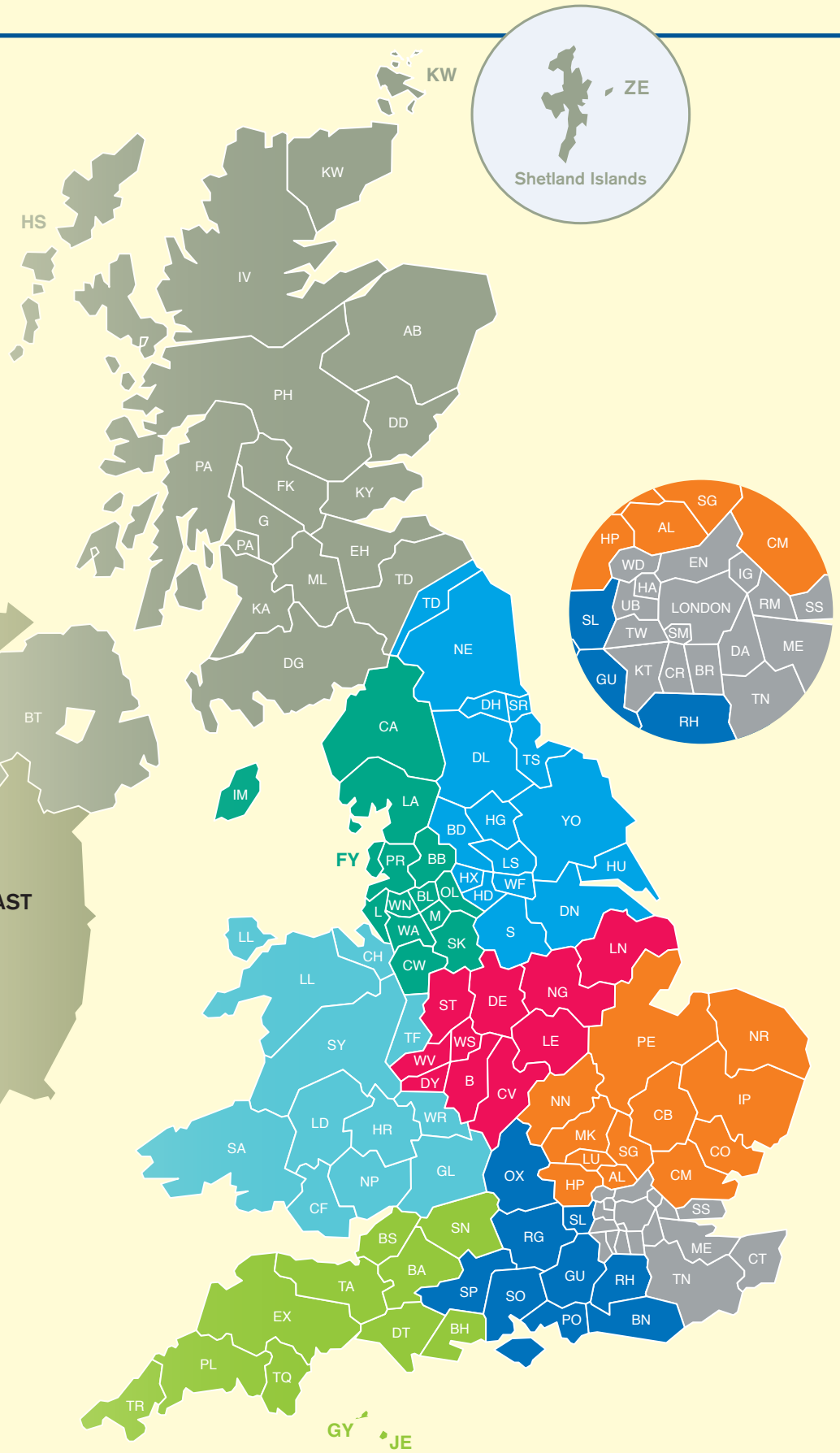
If you would like to send an email to a Branch official that is not related to Blesma activity, then personal contact information can still be used.



# Blesma by area

*Have you got a question or need advice? Don't hesitate to get in touch with the Blesma Support Officer in your area. The contact numbers for all BSOs, Outreach Officers and relevant members of staff can be found on p68.*

- SCOTLAND & NI
- NORTH WEST
- NORTH EAST
- EASTERN
- MIDLANDS
- WALES AND WEST
- SOUTH
- SOUTH WEST
- LONDON AND SOUTH EAST



# The Blesma Storytelling and Wellbeing Programme

The Blesma Storytelling and Wellbeing Programme (BSWP) offers Blesma Members a series of high-quality storytelling and creative workshops, both online and in person.

Further details can be found on the Activities page of the Blesma website or see below for some of the upcoming workshops.

## JANUARY

- Sheffield, 08 January** Keep It Fresh: Storytelling workshop for experienced storytellers  
**Southampton, 17 January** Blesma Voices: A songwriting workshop with David Tims  
**Nottingham, 20 January** Seasonal Stories for newcomers to storytelling  
**Cardiff, 27 January** Unlocking Imagination: A storytelling workshop with Phil Okwedy

## FEBRUARY

- Newcastle, 03-04 February** A two-day sculpture workshop with Simon Watson  
**Online, 10 February** Campfire Sharing

## MARCH

- Manchester, 11 March** Performing Stories with Frankie Mapes and Elspeth McColl  
**Online, 19 March** Comic Sketching with Gary Scribbler

## APRIL

- Bristol, 01-02 April** A two-day sculpture workshop with Simon Watson

## JULY

- Birmingham, 10 July** Comedy Improvisation with Alice Palmer

BSWP workshops are fully accessible and open to the entire Blesma membership unless stated otherwise (subject to completion of an onboarding process and space availability). The Drive Project ensures that the workshops are safe, inclusive and respectful environments with clear guidelines so that everyone is able to get the most out of their experience.

To find out more, or to book any of the workshops, please email [activities@blesma.org](mailto:activities@blesma.org)

What's  
coming  
up!



Email [activities@blesma.org](mailto:activities@blesma.org)