

# Project Façade: Bringing the pioneering surgery of Sir Harold Gillies to a wider audience



## SUMMARY

In Project Façade, stories of soldiers from World War I who suffered facial injuries – of the reconstructive surgery they underwent and of their attempts to readjust to postwar society – are told in a series of uniform sculptures based on their medical notes. The sculptures, which

were displayed at the National Army Museum for ten months, and on the project website, also celebrate the pioneering skin-grafting techniques of New Zealand surgeon Sir Harold Gillies – many of which form the basis of plastic surgery techniques used today.

## Background

Many soldiers in World War I suffered horrific facial injuries from explosives and shrapnel, but field surgeons were usually only able to stitch together the edges of the wounds to stop infection. As the wounds healed and scar tissue contracted, the men's faces were left twisted and disfigured.

Returning home, these soldiers were often unable to see, hear, speak, eat or drink. They also had to deal with people's reactions: society glorified the war dead but recoiled from the wounded.

New Zealand surgeon Sir Harold Gillies argued for the establishment of a hospital dedicated to facial injuries. In 1917, thanks to his efforts, Queen Mary's Hospital in Sidcup opened, and in all, 5000 World War I soldiers were treated there.

Instead of stitching the edges of wounds together, Gillies pioneered skin-grafting techniques to rebuild faces using tissue from elsewhere in the body. Many of his methods form the basis of plastic surgery techniques used today. Tens of thousands of people who suffered injuries due to road traffic accidents, facial cancers, assaults, acts of terrorism, and a host of other traumas and diseases, have benefited from Gillies's ground-breaking work.

Inspired by a visit to the Gillies Archive, which remains at Queen Mary's Hospital under the care of curator Dr Andrew Bamji, artist Paddy Hartley felt compelled to bring the stories of some of the servicemen who underwent Gillies's pioneering surgery to a wider public. He was awarded a Wellcome Trust Sciart Production Award to develop Project Façade.

## Outcome

Hartley's original aim was to create sculptures – using uniforms similar to those worn by the injured men, and working from the original patient records in the archive – to describe in simple, visual terms the surgery the men underwent. The uniforms represent the patients' skin and show the surgical techniques that Gillies used to move skin from another part of the body onto the face to reconstruct missing noses, ears, eyes and jaws.

However, in the course of his research, Hartley's work changed direction. The more he learned about these tragically disfigured men, their efforts to re-assimilate themselves back into an often uncomprehending society and the lifelong psychological impact of their injuries, the more the 'surgical explanation' became secondary to the personal narratives of these men.

"These were real lives I was dealing with, real experiences and real emotions. They were stories that have never been acknowledged, but must be told," he says.

His desire to find out how these men lived their lives after surgery led him to start tracing their families and recording their recollections of how the facially injured men coped with everyday life. Hartley stitched the testimonies of relatives into the fabric of the uniform sculptures, along with photographs, mementoes and case notes celebrating the extraordinary lives of these men.

He also developed an extensive website, [www.projectfacade.com](http://www.projectfacade.com), to showcase the case studies he followed, the medical notes, illustrations and photographs from their files, and the stories and recollections of their families.

## How it's making a difference

Paddy Hartley's uniform sculptures were displayed in the Project Façade exhibition *Faces of Battle* at the National Army Museum between November 2007 and August 2008. They were shown alongside original archive material from Sidcup, to provide context, background and personal narratives for each individual soldier represented.

At a time when British soldiers are returning injured from Iraq and Afghanistan, and facing reconstructive surgery and rehabilitation into society, the subject matter is highly relevant. It raises questions about appearance and plastic surgery – for example, is cosmetic surgery to take someone back in time so that they look younger any different from reconstructive surgery aiming to take a patient back to a period in time before their injury?

Hartley has given talks on Project Façade in various venues in England, the USA and Australia, and aims to display the exhibition in other venues. He has also worked in schools with the Changing Faces charity to introduce school students to facial disfigurement, and get them to explore their attitudes to disfigured people and facial difference. Some Project Façade pieces are in the *War and Medicine* exhibition at Wellcome Collection from November 2008.

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