

Current issues involving war memorials



War Memorials Trust

This helpsheet gives information about some issues that affect war memorials in the UK and ways in which young people can help care for their local war memorial.

Theft and vandalism

There has been a recent increase in the number of war memorials that have been vandalised or had metal elements stolen from them. The rising cost of metal has meant that war memorials with elements made of bronze, copper or lead have been targeted for their scrap metal value, which is usually extremely low compared to the cost of replacing the metal element. This can have a devastating impact on the memorial and the community. It is often the metal elements of memorials that bear inscriptions and the names of the fallen, and the loss of these can mean that the memorial loses its commemorative function and therefore some of its direct relevance to the community.

Other types of vandalism and damage can also affect war memorials. Graffiti and damage from inappropriate use of the memorial by skateboarders or cyclists are two examples. Damage caused by skateboards or bikes might be unintentional but still affects the war memorial and there is often a negative perception of people, especially young people, that use memorials in this way.

• What can be done to prevent and solve this problem?

The local community, including young people, can play an important role in preventing theft and encouraging proper use of a war memorial. It is usually the local community that will notice any damage to or unusual activity around the memorial and vigilance is therefore crucial. Young people should be encouraged to take an interest in their local memorial and monitor its condition in this way. They can also help to raise awareness of the memorial locally and so encourage others to also take an interest. A war memorial that is clearly cared for and is a prominent part of the community is less likely to be targeted by thieves or vandals. Of course young people should also be encouraged to set an appropriate example by not doing anything that might be seen as mistreating or disrespecting a war memorial.

Young people can also actively contribute to the protection of war memorials by taking part in a project called In Memoriam 2014. This is a partnership between War Memorials Trust and the SmartWater Foundation to protect war memorials that are at risk of theft or damage by marking them with a forensic liquid called SmartWater. Further information about the project and details of how young people can get involved can be found at www.learnaboutwarmemorials.org/youth-groups/projects.

Some recent thefts from war memorials have generated debate about what should happen to replace stolen elements and prevent similar incidents in the future. This can be a difficult issue because there is naturally a desire to make the memorial less appealing to criminals and so prevent further thefts, but this must be balanced with maintaining the historical integrity of the memorial. War Memorials Trust believes it is important to respect the choices made by the families and friends of those remembered, and that the historic integrity of the memorial should

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be preserved by using the same materials for replacement and repair when this is possible. In addition to the historical importance of the materials, there can be other problems with replacing metal with alternatives. The introduction of a different material can speed up the decay of a memorial, especially if the original materials had been interacting chemically for many years. Replacement materials may also not last as long as metal, so that while they may be cheaper initially regular replacement and maintenance may increase the overall cost. There is also the problem of the aesthetic effect on the memorial as a whole of using a different material. Finally, many people feel that using alternative, inferior substitute materials is 'letting the criminals win.' War Memorials Trust would encourage communities to take action, as suggested above, to prevent and deter theft and in doing so maintain the historic integrity of the original war memorial.

Lack of awareness and neglect

The age of many war memorials and the time that has passed since the conflicts they commemorate mean that some no longer have a direct link with the community. The passing of the generations that lived through the First World War and, increasingly, the Second World War means that these conflicts are almost beyond living memory and the people who witnessed a memorial's creation and knew those commemorated are no longer here. This, combined with changes to local populations over time, means that in many cases no-one living within a community has a personal connection with the memorial such as a relative commemorated on it, and those who do have such a personal connection have no direct memory of it. Furthermore, it can be difficult to establish ownership of for war memorials because they were created by local committees who often did not formally handover responsibility for the memorial to an appropriate person or organisation. A consequence of this can be a lack of awareness of the memorial, especially if it is not located in a very prominent place, leading to neglect and disrepair.

Local awareness and vigilance, as described above, is the best way to combat this. Many war memorials are the focal points for Remembrance Day commemorations and this is an ideal opportunity to raise local awareness and draw positive attention to the memorial and the stories of those commemorated. The World Wars and Remembrance are now part of the National Curriculum for History and this has meant increased knowledge of among younger people. In turn young people can help to inform others by researching names and raising the profile of the memorial.

Maintenance and repair

The age of many war memorials and the sometimes lack of clear ownership and responsibility for them also means that their maintenance and repair is an important issue. War Memorials Trust provides detailed guidance about this on its main website at www.warmemorials.org. Works to the actual fabric of a war memorial, such as cleaning, should always be carried out by specialists. However, young people can get involved by helping to maintain the area around a war memorial, for example by clearing weeds and litter.

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