

Teachers' information on war memorials



War Memorials Trust

This helpsheet is intended to give you an overview of some key facts and issues about war memorials of which it may be useful to be aware when considering how to include the topic of memorials and Remembrance in your primary school teaching. There is further, extensive information about war memorials and their conservation given on War Memorials Trust's main website (www.warmemorials.org). If you have any queries that are not answered through our helpsheets please contact the Learning Officer at learning@warmemorials.org for advice on how to incorporate war memorials into your teaching.

What is a war memorial?

There are estimated to be over 100,000 war memorials in the UK, but there are a number of different types and it is important to be aware of the different forms they can take.

The Oxford English Dictionary definition of a memorial is, 'a sign of remembrance; preserving or intended to preserve the memory of a person or thing.' Any object can be considered a war memorial provided its inscription or purpose behind its creation was linked to the remembrance of war or conflict. A war memorial can therefore be any object and be created or erected by anyone at any time.

A war memorial might be a permanent or temporary structure, or a living thing such as a tree. It might have a functional purpose, such as a village hall or a school built in memory of those who died in war, or be a plaque, statue, monument or roll of honour.

A war memorial can be located in a public or private place, and might commemorate groups of people or individuals. Those commemorated may have been killed in action or wartime accidents, or can have died from wounds or disease during or after a conflict. War memorials can also commemorate those who served and survived, civilians affected by war, and animals.

Further information on the many forms war memorials might take is given in War Memorials Trust's 'Types of war memorial' primary helpsheet. Our learning website (www.learnaboutwarmemorials.org) contains a Gallery section which has examples of photographs of each type of war memorial.

History of war memorials in the UK

It is estimated that there are over 100,000 war memorials in the UK. Most communities have at least one, with larger towns often having more, and they are a well known feature of town and village landscapes. Around two thirds of these memorials were created in the aftermath of the First World War and unveiled in the 1920s, but the earliest recorded by the Imperial War Museum's War Memorials Archive dates from the 7th century and there are many other examples from different eras. Many memorials that were created before the 19th century are celebratory, commemorating victories in war, or were created in memory of significant

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individuals such as great leaders. They do not tend to give the individual names of the majority that served or died. Towards the end of the 19th century, and especially after the Boer War of 1899-1902, memorials created by communities to commemorate and remember all those who had lost their lives in conflict became more widespread. These would often list the names of all the fallen.

However, because of the huge number of losses and the far reaching impact of the conflict (such as on civilians at home), memorialisation dramatically increased and shifted focus after the First World War, and it is this conflict which is generally seen as a turning point in terms of the creation of war memorials. It is thought that there are only 52 'thankful villages' in the UK, where all those who went to war also came home. Some of these contain no war memorial; others have one commemorating the service of those who fought and expressing gratitude for their safe return, highlighting the community's unusual status as a thankful village.

Part of the reason for the creation of so many memorials in the aftermath of the First World War was because, due to the sheer number of casualties, the British government did not permit the repatriation of bodies. Consequently, for the vast majority of the bereaved there was no funeral or grave and therefore no focal point for their grief at home. This led to many campaigns for permanent memorials to local men and women who had lost their lives in the conflict. Communities, either residents of the same area or members of the same workplace, school, church or other group, would usually form a war memorial committee to hold public meetings and decide on the form of the war memorial and who was to be commemorated. Because there were no rules or restrictions imposed on these decisions there are a great variety of war memorials, all of which reflect the feelings and wishes of the community at that time.

After the Second World War, during which there were fewer military losses but the scale of civilian casualties increased compared to the First World War, many communities chose to add to or extend their existing memorials, and names of the fallen were added to these. Some First and Second World War memorials have also been added to after subsequent conflicts, becoming focal points for commemoration of recent casualties. Today, the conflicts that many war memorials were originally erected in memory of are beyond living memory and many communities do not have such a strong personal link to their memorial as they once did, but the importance of war memorials in the ongoing and future commemoration of those involved in conflict remains.

Information given on war memorials

Because war memorials from the 20th century were created as a result of decisions made by local committees, they all vary and represent the individual wishes of communities about how they wanted their sacrifices to be remembered by future generations. As well as the memorial structure varying (see our 'Types of war memorial' primary helpsheet for more information on this) the information given on memorials varies. While most war memorials bear an inscription identifying the conflict it commemorates and dedicating it to the fallen, the way individual casualties are recorded differs. Some memorials do not record individual names at all; others may record full names or surname and initials, while others include further information about the casualty such as age, date of death, and sometimes the theatre of war in which they served and the nature of their death. Some memorials also list the rank or regiment of casualties. Names may be listed alphabetically, chronologically, or in order of rank.

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This variation in the information recorded on memorials means that they differ in how they can be used as a source of information about the past. Clearly, a war memorial that gives more detail about the individuals it commemorates can be extremely useful as a source of information when researching that person's background. However, a memorial that cannot be used for this aspect of research is useful in other ways. They might provide information on designers and the creativity involved in creating a memorial. The design chosen can also provide a fascinating insight into the feelings of a community and how they chose to have their sacrifices remembered.

The continuing importance of war memorials

War Memorials Trust works for the conservation and protection of all war memorials in the UK, and aims to build an understanding of our war memorial heritage to ensure that the ongoing importance of memorials is recognised. War memorials continue to be a well known sight in the UK and they are often used as the focal point for commemoration, especially around Remembrance Day and other significant anniversaries. Memorials were usually erected either by members of the local community or by people associated with those who are commemorated and they therefore represent the views and choices of that community at a specific point in history. Each memorial is therefore unique and important to the community in which it is located.

In addition to the personal importance of a war memorial to a community, it is sometimes the case that the memorial is the only record of individual names, and as such it is important to preserve the memorial and the name so that we can continue to commemorate that individual's sacrifice. In this way, memorials are also a useful historical source and an important part of our heritage that must therefore be protected.

In the past, when the First and Second World Wars were both a significant part of living memory, war memorials provided communities with a focal point for remembering the sacrifices of those who were commemorated. It is still the case today that war memorials are very often used as a focal point for commemoration but increasingly, with the passing of those who directly remember and were involved in the conflicts, memorials are becoming an historical touchstone rather than a part of living memory, providing a crucial link to the past and enabling people to still 'remember' despite not experiencing the conflict directly themselves. The sacrifices made by so many for freedom must be remembered, and war memorials play a vital part in ensuring that this continues to happen even after the events are beyond living memory.

Furthermore, many war memorials are important to the country's architectural and artistic heritage. After the First World War, many commissions for the design of war memorials went to established practitioners and architects like Sir Edwin Lutyens, Sir Reginald Blomfield, and sculptors like William Reid Dick, Sir George Frampton and Albert Toft. Some younger architects and sculptors also came to the fore and excelled like Lionel Budden, Walter Marsden, Gilbert Ledward, Tyson Smith and C S Jagger, laying the foundations for successful and distinguished post-war careers. This huge public art project remains a unique event as towns and villages across the UK expressed their emotions at the end of war, relief, sorrow or celebration of victory, in a public sculpture and art project of huge diversity.

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