

Current issues involving war memorials

On this sheet you will learn:

- Some of the problems that face war memorials today.
- How you and your group can get involved and help to prevent these problems.

The importance of war memorials

War memorials are hugely important – both **nationally**, as a unique part of our heritage and a reminder of some of the most important events in our past; and **personally**, as individual **tributes** from bereaved communities and records of their loved ones' sacrifices. Rather than their importance diminishing as time goes on, the **historical value** of war memorials is recognised more as the key conflicts of the twentieth century move beyond living memory. As this happens, war memorials become **touchstones** to the past. Sometimes they are the only record of individual contributions to the war and can help us learn more about these.

Many custodians work hard to **preserve** their war memorials and most people **respect** what war memorials represent, as shown by the increase of interest in them and **Remembrance Day** that we have seen in recent years.

Unfortunately though, there are problems that affect war memorials, such as neglect and poor condition, vandalism and theft.

Age and neglect

As time passes war memorials **weather** and age, particularly those located outside. This in itself is not necessarily a major problem – some people prefer war memorials to look their age so that they reflect their **historical** status, rather than undertaking regular work to keep them looking new. Many custodians take care to ensure that their war memorial is kept in good condition despite its age. However,

other factors mean that some memorials are not maintained like this and as they age they become **neglected** and fall into disrepair.

For example, some war memorials are in awkward **locations**. Even if they were publicly accessible when they were created changes in land use, new roads, school mergers or closure of buildings can mean that they are now no longer used or known about.

Ownership of war memorials can be hard to establish, so it is often not clear who is responsible for **maintenance**. Population changes as people move away can also mean that a community does not have the same **personal** link to the memorial as it once did, and so does not have the same motivation to keep it in good repair. These factors can all contribute to a war memorial becoming lost or damaged.

Theft and vandalism

Some war memorials might be cared for by the local community but are the targets of deliberate acts of vandalism and theft. This can include damage to the **structure** of a memorial, **graffiti**, or theft of certain materials (especially metal).



Kirkby war memorial, Merseyside, after vandalism. © Kings Regt. Association Knowsley, 2005.

During 2011 60 cases of theft or vandalism to war memorials were reported – this works out at more than **one every week**. These incidents peaked in October of that year when War Memorials Trust heard about three cases a week. In many of

these cases the **metal** plaques of a war memorial were stolen so that they could be sold for **scrap**.



Carshalton war memorial after metal plaques listing names were stolen. © War Memorials Trust, 2011.

This has a **devastating** impact on the community. It is often the metal parts of war memorials that are important to people, because they list **names** of the fallen or form the central feature of the memorial (such as a statue). Losing these means the memorial can no longer be used as a focal point for **commemoration** in the same way. The financial impact can also be huge. The money that thieves will get by selling the stolen metal is far less than the **cost** of replacing it, and this cost can be difficult for the community to meet.

Incidents like this often cause **anger**. Most people have respect for what a war memorial represents and believe they should be looked after, so seeing them vandalised in this way is **upsetting**.

Other damage

War memorials are sometimes damaged by people not using them appropriately, even if no harm is intended. This particularly applies to larger war memorial monuments where people might sit on them or use the area around them for **cycling** or **skateboarding**. This can cause damage to paving or railings or result in **litter** being left around the memorial. Even if no physical damage is caused many people believe treating a war memorial in these ways shows a lack of **respect**. It is important to create a balance between interacting with the memorial and doing so

in a way that will not put it at **risk**.

Preventing the problems

There are ways of solving these problems and youth groups like yours have a really important role to play in this.

Raising **awareness** of the war memorial and ensuring it is well maintained keeps it at the heart of the community and makes it less appealing to vandals. General **vigilance** of the condition of a memorial will also mean that should a it be targeted or start to fall into disrepair, any issues are able to be dealt with quickly.

The more people know about war memorials the more likely they are to treat them appropriately. Telling locals about your war memorial and why it is important can help. Damage caused by cyclists or other people using the memorial area is not usually intentional, and most people will usually want to treat war memorials correctly.

Finally, a project called **In Memoriam 2014** tries to combat the problem of metal theft from war memorials. This involves using **SmartWater** to make metal parts of memorials identifiable and easier to trace if they are stolen. Young people are encouraged to get involved in this - further information can be found in our 'In Memoriam 2014' project sheet at www.learnaboutwarmemorials.org/youth-groups/projects.

Summary

- Neglect, damage, vandalism and theft are all **problems** affecting war memorials.
- There are lots of ways **communities** can try to **prevent** problems. Young people can find out how to get involved using War Memorials Trust's resources.
- Solutions include better awareness of war memorials and registering a memorial with the In Memoriam 2014 project to combat theft.