

Current issues involving war memorials



War Memorials Trust

This helpsheet gives information about some current key issues that affect war memorials and their protection. War memorials are likely to become increasingly important focal points for commemorative events during the centenary of the First World War, and awareness of these issues will enable you to incorporate the topic into your teaching in a meaningful way.

Theft and vandalism

Unfortunately, the rising cost of metal has meant that in recent years war memorials with elements made of bronze, copper or lead have been targeted for their scrap metal value. Clearly this has a huge 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 war memorial loses its commemorative function and therefore some of its relevance to the community. Other types of vandalism 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.

The local community, including young people, can play an important role in helping to prevent theft and in persuading others to look after their memorials. Local vigilance and co-operation is crucial, since it is usually the local community that will notice any unusual activity around the memorial or any damage to it. Young people should be encouraged to take an interest in their memorial, become familiar with it and monitor its condition in this way. They can also help to raise awareness of the memorial locally and so encourage others to take care of it. A war memorial that is clearly cared for and a prominent feature of the community will be less appealing to thieves or vandals.

Some recent thefts from war memorials have also generated debate about what should happen to replace the stolen elements. We appreciate that this can be a difficult issue because it is difficult to balance a desire to prevent further thefts with a need to preserve the historic integrity of the war 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 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.

War Memorials Trust 14 Buckingham Palace Road London SW1W 0QP

Telephone: 020 7233 7356/ 0300 123 0764

Email: learning@warmemorials.org Website: www.learnaboutwarmemorials.org

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In Memoriam 2014

One way of deterring metal theft is through In Memoriam 2014. The years 2014-2018 will mark the centenary of the First World War. There will be many events and projects taking place to commemorate this landmark event, one of which is a project called In Memoriam 2014. This is a partnership between War Memorials Trust and the SmartWater Foundation, and will protect war memorials that are at risk of theft or damage by marking them with a forensic liquid called SmartWater. More information is available at www.inmemoriam2014.org.

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 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.

War Memorials Trust also runs a website called War Memorials Online (www.warmemorialsonline.org.uk) which allows anyone to add information about the location and condition of a war memorial they know of, including photographs. The idea of this is to build up an overall picture of the condition of the UK's war memorials so that concerns over condition can be noted and acted on, ensuring that our war memorials continue to be preserved for future generations. Young people can also get involved with War Memorials Online by ensuring that information about their local war memorial(s) is added to the site. Further information about how to do this is given in War Memorials Trust's 'War Memorials Online' project sheet in the Youth Groups section of www.learnaboutwarmemorials.org.

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