

Teachers' information about war memorials



War Memorials Trust

This helpsheet provides key information secondary teachers will need when using War Memorials Trust's secondary lesson plans. It covers important background information about war memorials and some of the issues that affect them. There is further information about specific war memorial topics available in our other learning helpsheets, available at www.learnaboutwarmemorials.org, and our conservation helpsheets, available at www.warmemorials.org.

What is a war memorial?

It is estimated that there are around 100,000 war memorials in the UK, but there are a number of different types and it is important to be aware of what is considered to be a war memorial.

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

A war memorial can be a permanent or temporary structure, or a living thing such as a tree. It might have a functional purpose, such as 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 in 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.

War Memorials Trust works for the conservation and protection of war memorials in the UK only. However, the information and teaching materials produced by the Trust can also be useful when studying war memorials overseas, for example in preparation for an educational visit. The Trust does not include grave markers where the body is present in its definition of a war memorial, but again some of our materials may be useful to teachers studying war graves or names on headstones.

History of war memorials and Remembrance in the UK

War memorials are an intrinsic part of our landscape and everyday life. While approximately two-thirds of the UK's war memorials are connected to the First World War, there is a longer history of memorialisation dating as far back as the seventh century, when the earliest memorial recorded

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by the Imperial War Museum's War Memorials Archive was created, and continuing right up to the present day.

- **Changes to war memorials and who they commemorate**

The intention behind the creation of war memorials has undergone change during this time. Prior to the nineteenth century, many memorials were more celebratory in nature than we might expect from memorials to more recent conflicts. They were created to commemorate victories during wars or in memory of significant leaders. They do not tend to list names or refer to the lower ranks who served and died. The Boer War of 1899-1902 went some way to changing the public perception of these ranks, and especially of volunteers. After this war memorials created by communities to remember all those who had lost their lives in conflict became more widespread. Memorials that individually listed the names of the fallen also increased.

However, it is the First World War which is usually seen as a major turning point in terms of memorialisation. The huge scale of military casualties, the impact of the war on civilians and the fact that repatriation of the dead was not permitted are the key reasons why so many war memorials were created in the aftermath of this war.

One of the key reasons for there being such a drive to create war memorials in this period was the fact that, unlike today, service personnel who died overseas were not repatriated. The logistical impossibility of doing this when numbers were so high, combined with a belief that the dead should be treated equally regardless of rank and wealth, meant that casualties were buried in cemeteries near the battlefields where they died. Many more casualties have no known grave and are commemorated on memorials to the missing. This meant that bereaved families had no grave as a focus for their grief at home and so communities, whether residents of the same area or members of the same workplace, school, church or other group, formed committees to create a war memorial to commemorate their dead.

The Second World War saw fewer military losses than the First World War but more civilian casualties. Many communities chose to add the names of the fallen from this conflict to their existing war memorials, although some new memorials were and still are created, especially to commemorate civilians and specific groups involved in the Second World War. In the latter half of the twentieth century many memorials have received further additions as a result of losses during more recent conflicts, including the Korean War and Afghanistan.

While the motivation for creating a war memorial in the aftermath of the World Wars was the same in communities across the UK, the resulting monuments and structures are hugely diverse. There were no rules or government directives about what form war memorials should take (advice existed but there were no regulations) and this means that each memorial is unique; a touchstone to the past that reflects how bereaved communities personally chose to remember their fallen.

Further information about the information that can be found on war memorials can be found below and a guide to the range of memorial designs can be found in our 'Types of war memorial' secondary helpsheet.

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- **Changes to Remembrance commemorations**

Public attitudes to Remembrance Day and the marking of the end of the First World War have shifted since 1918. After the initial jubilation at the signing of the Armistice in 1918, the first and second anniversaries of the signing of the Armistice had a solemn rather than victorious atmosphere. The Cenotaph in Whitehall, at first a temporary structure but replaced in 1920 with a replica made of Portland stone, quickly became the focus for commemorative events as crowds gathered to lay wreaths. November 11th 1919 saw the first observance of a minute's silence at 11 o' clock, in which the vast majority of people participated, wherever they were and whatever they were doing. A year later, on the same day that the permanent Cenotaph was unveiled, the Unknown Warrior was buried in Westminster Abbey to honour ordinary service personnel who had fought. This period and the early 1920s was also when most of the memorials that commemorate the First World War were erected, as thousands of communities paid tribute to their fallen.

However, there were other aspects to Remembrance Day that emerged as the 1920s continued. In 1921 some ex-servicemen, disillusioned by the lack of opportunity and support they had received since returning home and disagreeing with continued concentration on the dead when survivors needed help, disrupted the service at the Cenotaph and this was an occurrence that was repeated throughout the 1920s. At the same time, some young people began holding celebrations on November 11th, although this had begun to decline in favour of more sombre events by the mid-1920s.

During the Second World War Remembrance commemorations declined as focus switched from remembering the previous war to fighting the current one, and after 1945 both wars were remembered during services that were held on the Sunday closest to November 11th. Marking the day during church services and on a Sunday meant that commemorations were not such an overt part of everyday life as they were when normal activities were suspended at 11 o' clock on whichever day the 11th fell on. People had to make more of an effort to participate and as a result interest in commemorating Remembrance Day declined in the post Second World War years as the conflict became more distant.

However, the end of the twentieth century saw a resurgence in interest in the First World War. This was partly due to declining numbers of veterans and the publication of various books concerning the conflict. This, and the fact that the UK's involvement in more recent conflicts has brought the subject sharply back into focus, has contributed to Remembrance Day being given a higher profile once more. The inclusion of the two World Wars on the National Curriculum also meant a greater awareness of them among a new generation. In the 1990s the two minute silence began to be held on November 11th itself, regardless of whether it was a Sunday or not. Remembrance therefore became a more integral part of daily life on that day once more.

Now, as we approach the centenary of the outbreak of the First World War and national plans for marking it are developing, public interest in the conflict and in war memorials is increasing further. While the meaning of Remembrance Day has changed over the last century, this landmark anniversary is an opportunity to reflect on its origins, and war memorials are likely to be an important part of the commemorations.

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Information given on war memorials

There are significant variations in war memorial design due to the fact that they were created by individual communities according to their wishes about how they wanted their losses remembered by future generations. The same is true for the information given on war memorials. While most bear an inscription identifying the conflict it commemorates and dedicating it to the fallen, the way in which individual casualties are recorded varies. 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 how they died or the theatre of war in which they served. Names may be listed alphabetically, chronologically or in order of rank. A war memorial can therefore be a valuable resource when finding out about the local people who served in wars.

Researching war memorials can also reveal other information about the wider community at the time that the memorial was created. The location of a memorial was sometimes specifically chosen because it held some meaning for the community or the people commemorated (for example, some memorials were located on the spot where young men signed up to serve, or in a place where they used to meet and socialise before the war). Researching the reason behind the memorial's location can reveal information about the locality and the community at the time.

Continuing importance of war memorials

War Memorials Trust aims to build an understanding of war memorial heritage to ensure that the importance of war memorials is recognised, and they are therefore protected. War memorials continue to be a well known sight and often form the focal point for commemorations, on Remembrance Day and other anniversaries. Memorials were usually erected by members of the community that had a connection with the fallen, and they therefore represent the views and wishes 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 the community, it is sometimes the case that the memorial is the only record of individual names. 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 a useful and important source of historical information.

When the First and Second World Wars were a significant part of living memory, war memorials provided communities with a focal point for remembering those who are commemorated. It is still the case today that war memorials are the focal points for commemorative events but increasingly, with the passing of those who directly remember and were involved in the conflicts, memorials are becoming an historical touchstone, providing a link to the past and enabling people to still 'remember' despite not experiencing the conflict directly themselves. The sacrifices made by so many must be remembered and war memorials play a vital part in ensuring this happens 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

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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 CS Jagger, laying the foundations for successful and distinguished post war careers. This huge public art project remains unique 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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