

Types of war memorial



War Memorials Trust

This helpsheet provides information on the different types of war memorial in the UK and explains some of the features of them. Pictures of each type of memorial mentioned here can be found in the Gallery section of our learning website. Other useful information can also be found in our 'Teachers' information about war memorials,' secondary helpsheet and our conservation helpsheets at www.warmemorials.org.

- **Monuments, sculptures and crosses**

Many war memorials in the UK take one of these 'traditional' forms. Popular types of monument include **cenotaphs**, **obelisks** and **pillars**. The word 'cenotaph' derives from Greek and means 'empty tomb.' This is often used to symbolise casualties with no known grave, the most famous example being the Cenotaph in Whitehall, London. Many war memorial pillars are constructed to look broken off, symbolising lives cut short.

Sculptures may form the whole memorial or be part of a larger monument and are often used to commemorate a specific group. Notable examples include the 'Women of World War II' memorial in Whitehall, London, and the 'Shot at Dawn' memorial at the National Memorial Arboretum in Staffordshire. **Victory** or **peace** sculptures are often incorporated into war memorials, as are sculpted figures of **service personnel**.

There are many forms of war memorial cross. Many memorials are modelled on Sir Reginald Blomfield's **Cross of Sacrifice**, which is used in larger Commonwealth War Grave Commission cemeteries. **Wheel crosses**, **Latin crosses** and **calvaries** are also often used in war memorials.

- **Plaques**

Plaques are frequently included in war memorial designs, and can be the whole memorial, part of a larger design, or placed alongside another memorial type to indicate its status as a war memorial.

Where they are used as part of a larger memorial, plaques are often the part that bear inscriptions or list names. As such they carry much emotional importance, since it is often the names on a memorial that are considered the most significant aspect of it. Unfortunately plaques that are made of metal are often at risk from theft or vandalism (see our 'Current issues involving war memorials' secondary helpsheet) because of the scrap metal value of the plaque. This has resulted in a drive to protect metal elements of war memorials to prevent them becoming targets for theft and vandalism.

- **Buildings, windows, gardens and objects**

Some war memorials are more unusual. Some communities chose a functional memorial; a building such as a **school**, **sports pavilion**, **community hall** or **hospital**, or a **bus shelter**, that

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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the community could make use of. Other memorial buildings have included **shrines, clock towers** and **chapels** and other buildings might have **gates** dedicated as a war memorial.

Windows that commemorate war dead are another form of memorial often used after the First World War. Some have a dedication forming part of the window's design whereas others are accompanied by a **plaque** or **roll of honour**. Other war memorials are outdoor features such as **walls, gardens, parks** or **landscape** features. These may have a monument, gate or other structure within them or a notice that it is a memorial.

Finally, various **objects, paintings, photographic tributes** and even **vehicles** have been dedicated as war memorials. A range of examples can be found in War Memorials Trust's Gallery at www.learnaboutwarmemorials.org. This demonstrates the huge diversity in war memorial design that exists in the UK, which is one of the factors that make war memorials such a fascinating part of our heritage.

- **Design features and imagery used on war memorials**

Although war memorials can differ in terms of their main design type, there are many common design features or images that are often used on memorials. A **wreath** is often carved or painted onto a memorial plaque or monument. This is a traditional symbol of commemoration, symbolising ongoing life. Laurel wreaths are also a traditional symbol of victory. Another commonly used image on many larger monuments is a carved soldier with **arms reversed**. This is a traditional symbol of mourning or respect. Many memorials also feature an **'eternal light'** or patriotic symbols such as **flags**.

- **'Thankful' war memorials**

Not all war memorials commemorate the fallen or exist solely for this purpose. In the UK there are thought to be around 50 **'thankful villages,'** a phrase first used in the 1930s to describe communities where no-one who served in the First World War was killed and all servicemen and women returned home safely. While these places obviously do not have war memorials that commemorate people who were killed, many do have a monument or plaque that highlights the community's somewhat unusual status and gives thanks for the safe return of those who fought. A handful of these places are, **'doubly thankful,'** that is, no-one from them was lost in the Second World War either.

Many other war memorials that do list names of the fallen also list those that served and returned and include an inscription that expresses gratitude for their survival.

Why is there such diversity in war memorial design?

War memorials were created by individual communities according to decisions made by local committees. There were no government directives or any rules about what form a memorial should take. This led to an incredibly diverse range of designs and is one reason why war memorials are such an important part of our heritage. They reflect the wishes of that community at that time and provide a fascinating insight into the feelings of the population in the aftermath of war.

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