Researching names on war memorials

This helpsheet provides detailed guidance for teachers and leaders who are researching the names on war memorials with young people. Guidance on researching the actual memorial is given in our 'Researching a war memorial' secondary helpsheet.

Reasons for getting young people to research names on war memorials

Researching names on a war memorial can be an interesting and useful activity for young people. It teaches them to develop and practise research skills which can be applied throughout the curriculum. Processing the information, for example by creating a database, can also incorporate skills in mathematics and ICT. Most importantly, finding out the personal stories of those named on the war memorial can give pupils a deeper understanding of the memorial's significance and exactly what it represents, and therefore motivate them to care for it and contribute to its future protection.

Potential problems with research and how to overcome them

There have never been fixed rules about who could be included on a war memorial; it was a decision taken by those who created it. The criteria for inclusion varied and so who appears on a memorial varies as well. Some memorials record only those who died, others include those who served and returned, and some include civilian casualties of war. It is worth bearing this in mind when you are using the sources of information listed here, and trying to establish what type of casualty you are looking for.

In addition, someone can be named on a war memorial in a place where they used to live but moved away from, or may be named on more than one memorial (e.g. one dedicated to the fallen from their particular town and one for their workplace). These factors mean that researching a name, especially of someone from a large community, may not always be straightforward. However, this can be a useful way of introducing more complex research skills to older or higher ability pupils.

There is more information about how to use the resources listed below in the classroom in our 'Researching names on war memorials' secondary lesson plan.

How to research names on a war memorial

There are many sources of information available. Our sources for Basic research are free to use and should be accessible to most secondary aged pupils. They also require less teacher preparation and may therefore be preferable if time is limited or you have not undertaken this sort of project before. Our Advanced research resources are either suitable for more in depth research about a casualty and their family and life before the war or cost money to access and may therefore be less suitable for school use unless you have the time and facilities to make the most of them.

a. Basic research

- **The Commonwealth War Graves Commission casualty database**
  This is the best starting point for researching names on war memorials with young people. The CWGC website (www.cwgc.org) contains their casualty database, which can be searched using the casualty's name and other details about them. This provides details such as the casualty's full name, age and date of death, as well as their regiment, rank, service number and where their grave or CWGC memorial is located. Many entries carry additional information which often lists relatives and where the casualty lived; sometimes even giving their full address. It is therefore possible to search for a place name and reveal some casualties from that place (where their record includes the place name as additional information) which can be useful if a memorial does not list names. The database also includes some records for civilian casualties. Using the database is it fairly straightforward, therefore, to build up a basic profile of a war casualty and their service during the conflict. The database should be suitable for secondary pupils to use independently, but remember that some names will return a lot of results and some might need help analysing these to make sure they get accurate information.

- **Local archives/libraries/museums**
  Depending on your location, these can provide information about those named on a war memorial and it might be worth gathering information from them prior to a lesson and providing pupils with photocopies or extracts of information prepared by you. Libraries, which you may be able to visit with pupils, often have a local history section or allow you to access past editions of local newspapers, which often gave lots of detail on war memorial unveilings. Local newspapers from the time of the war or the memorial's creation often also provide detailed information on the background to the memorial and obituaries for those it commemorates. You could also visit a museum with pupils so they can find things out for themselves, depending on the nature of the information held and how accessible this is to pupils. It is also worth considering school or company archived records if the memorial commemorates people from that school or workplace.

- **Free BMD**
  www.freeBMD.org.uk is a website that provides, for free, basic information about birth, marriage and death registers. The information has been transcribed and this can be a valuable source for approximate dates of birth, marriage and death but some pupils may need support searching for the correct information and understanding it.

- **London Gazette**
  The London Gazette is one of the official journals of record of the British government and is a bank of information from various sources. Among the information it contains is notices of commissions in the Armed Forces and the subsequent promotion of officers. The Gazette's website (http://www.london-gazette.co.uk) can be browsed and registered users are able to search the complete archives, including the Ministry of Defence supplement.

- **Talk to local people**
  While the First World War is beyond living memory, there may still be people living locally who can shed some light on the memorial's history and additions or changes made to it more recently. In some communities relatives of the deceased may still live there and hold information about their ancestor. Many people are supportive of young people undertaking such a project and might offer to lend information or come and speak to pupils, so it is worth

putting out a local appeal for information. This can be a great way of building community and inter-generational links.

b. **Advanced research**

- **Census, birth, marriage and death records**
  If you know the name and age of the person you are researching, using the census records, parish records and birth, marriage and death records can reveal additional information about the person, particularly their family and home life prior to and, if applicable, after the war (remember many war memorials list those who served and survived as well as those killed). Parish registers are available for records of birth, marriage and death, while census returns for a locality are usually available on microfilm at local or county record offices. There are also various websites, such as www.1901censusonline.com, www.findmypast.co.uk and www.ancestry.co.uk that allow you to access family history and census information online. These are probably easier to use for young people because the records are transcribed and more easily to access online, but these sites do require a fee or the use of bought 'credits' if being used on a personal or school computer (although access is often free of charge in libraries if a visit to one can be arranged). Further details of such websites can be found at www.learnaboutwarmemorials.com/links.

  Please note that the census is only taken every ten years. Census records are also only currently available up to 1911. This is because such records are not made publicly accessible for 100 years. Therefore these will not be particularly helpful if you are researching a Second World War casualty (except for providing information about their birth and family pre-1911).

- **Regimental records**
  Many regiments kept war diaries documenting their actions during wartime. After the conflict, these diaries were often used to produce regimental histories which may be of use.

- **Service records and Medal Cards**
  After the First World War the War Office kept every soldier's service record. Unfortunately many of these were lost or damaged during bombing in the Second World War but they can be used to gain information about an individual provided you have their basic details (e.g. full name, rank and regiment). The records can be viewed via www.ancestry.co.uk for subscribed users of this website, or for on microfilm free in person at the National Archives at Kew.

  Records of medals issued during the First World War were also kept and were not damaged by Second World War bombing. Medal Index Cards can be viewed on microfiche at the National Archives at Kew if a download is paid for. Scans of the front and reverse of the cards are also available for subscribed users of www.ancestry.co.uk.

What to do with your research

Your pupils' research into the names on war memorials can be developed and extended into other areas of the curriculum. In particular, you could use the research you have done into the people named on the war memorial as a starting point for a wider study of the history of the local area. You might also consider how you could help your pupils present their findings to the wider community and other schools, perhaps through a display, assembly or film or drama production.

This will give them the opportunity to display their work and develop presentational skills, as well as creating valuable community links.