

Blean memorial field Blean, Canterbury

Introduction

The war memorial in the village of Blean, near Canterbury, is a recreation field situated behind the village hall on School Lane. In addition to the field there are two brass war memorial plaques in the village's St Cosmus and St Damian Church which list the names of members of Blean's community who lost their lives in the First and Second World Wars. The information given here focuses on the recreation field.

Design of the war memorial

The field is at the back of the village hall and contains various pieces of play equipment as well as seating and a large open space. At the entrance to the field, to the right of the hall, there are gates and the gateposts carry information identifying the field as a war memorial. An inscription, 'Blean war memorial recreation ground' runs across the capping stones atop each gate post: (the first three words on the left hand post; the last two on the right). On the left hand post there is a plaque bearing the words, 'Memorial Field dedicated to the men of Blean who died in the Great War 1914-1918. We also remember those who have died in all wars and conflicts throughout the years.' In addition there is a planted area in front of the gates at the roadside, includes letters spelling out 'Welcome' and a further notice welcoming people to the field and identifying it as a First World War memorial to Blean's fallen.

The memorial is an interesting example of a more functional war memorial design. Many war memorials have a fairly traditional sculptural design and it is these that we tend to be more familiar with and that tend to form our ideas of what war memorials look like.

However, many communities after the First World War chose to erect war memorials that had an additional purpose alongside commemoration. These included village halls and other community buildings, hospitals, school buildings and recreational areas. Examples of different war memorial types can be seen in War Memorials Trust's Gallery of war memorials at www.learnaboutwarmemorials.org/youth-groups.

History of the war memorial

Prior to the First World War the building adjoining the memorial field (now the village hall) was Blean School, built in the 1860s. It remained the school during the First World War and until 1929 when the current school was built elsewhere in the village and the original school building was purchased by the Parish Council. At the time of the field's dedication as a war memorial, therefore, it adjoined the village school.

The field itself was a market garden small holding prior to being dedicated as a war memorial. During a meeting of the Parish Council held on 16th October 1919, it was 'unanimously approved to accept on behalf of the parish of Blean, the field adjoining the school as a public recreation ground as a memorial of those fallen in the Great War.' The land was purchased for £150 by the Parish Council in 1921. Following the field's dedication as a war memorial it has been used by the local community,



Entrance to Blean war memorial playing field, Blean, Canterbury © WMT, 2014



Dedication plaque at entrance to memorial playing field © WMT, 2014

particularly children, for recreation and continues to commemorate the fallen of the First World War.

Changes to the war memorial

In recent years proposed changes to the war memorial recreation ground have caused some opposition within the local community. These proposals have included extensions to the village hall that would encroach on the recreation ground, and the redevelopment of part of the recreation ground for new housing. Such changes are often desirable and even necessary, but the nature of this particular war memorial would have meant that the planned changes sacrificed some of the memorial itself (i.e. the land on which the proposed building would have taken place). While War Memorials Trust supports changes that enable war memorial buildings (or buildings on land that is a war memorial) to comply with legal requirements, the charity would not support proposals that mean the original intention of the memorial (in this case, as a recreation ground for use by local residents) is compromised. Eventually the plans to extensively alter the recreation ground were abandoned and the area remains in use as a public space.

Furthermore, in November 2011 the plaque on the gatepost at the entrance to the memorial field was vandalised. It was believed that thieves were attempting to remove the plaques to sell the metal for scrap. Once again this caused considerable distress to the community and highlighted the importance of the recreation ground as a focus for remembrance to local people. The plaques were later replaced.

Teaching suggestions

Information about and photographs of this memorial can be used in sessions with young people about:

- 'Functional' war memorials: many young people automatically think a war memorial is a stone cross or monument. Blean's recreation field provides an interesting and local challenge to this idea.
- Types of war memorials: the fact that the recreation ground is still a much used part of the community can be used to explore opinions about whether such functional memorials are more suitable than traditional monuments as a means of remembering the fallen because the current community continues to engage with the memorial, and therefore think about what it represents, during their day to day lives in a way they perhaps do not with a more traditional memorial. While neither type of memorial should be seen as 'better' than another, this question can be an interesting way of exploring war memorial designs with young people and encouraging them to express their opinions.
- Community decisions about war memorials: the debate and strength of local feeling around proposed developments to the field highlight how decisions about war memorials are, and always have been, taken by the community with no specific rules about what should happen concerning a war memorial.

Useful links

The following links may provide additional helpful information about this memorial:

- War Memorials Online record: <https://www.warmemorialsonline.org.uk/node/107458>

Further information can be found at www.learnaboutwarmemorials.org/links which may help with lessons on some of the wider issues suggested here.

For further information and resources please contact the Learning Officer at:
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