

Researching names on war memorials



War Memorials Trust

This helpsheet is intended to provide guidance for teachers and leaders who are researching the names on war memorials with young people. Specific guidance on researching the actual memorial can be found in War Memorials Trust's 'Researching a war memorial' primary helpsheet.

Reasons for getting young people to research names on war memorials

Researching the names on a local war memorial can be an interesting and useful activity for young people. It teaches them to develop research skills which can be applied throughout the curriculum. Processing the information they find out, for example by creating a simple database, can also incorporate skills in mathematics and ICT. Most importantly, finding out the personal stories of those named on the war memorial can help young people in particular see them as real people not just a list of names, and this gives 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

Please remember that 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 as such 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. The exact reason for someone being on a memorial is not always made clear (e.g. it is not always explained in the memorial inscription who was killed and who survived). It is worth bearing this in mind when you are searching for a name in the sources of information listed below, 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 had moved away from (e.g. if family remaining in the area included their relative's name on their local memorial), 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 and there may not be an immediately obvious link between the person and that community. However, this can be a useful way of introducing more complex research skills to older or higher ability pupils.

How to research names on a war memorial

There are various sources of information to help you research the names on your local war memorial. Our list of resources for Basic research are ones which are most suitable for use with

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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primary aged children and which will be reasonably accessible for a primary school. Our Advanced research resources are 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 primary school use.

a. Basic research

- **The Commonwealth War Graves Commission**

This is the best starting point for researching names on war memorials with primary school pupils. The CWGC website (www.cwgc.org) contains their casualty database, which can be searched using the casualty's name. 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 memorial is located. Many entries carry additional information, often listing relatives and where the casualty lived. It is therefore possible to search for a place name in the 'Additional information' field 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.

The database should be suitable for older children to use independently with some modelling/support, but remember that some names will return a lot of results and some children might need help analysing these to make sure they get accurate information. Further advice on using the database can be found in lesson 6 of our primary cross curricular topic, 'Researching names on war memorials.'

It is important to remember that this database only lists casualties who were killed during the two World Wars (the CWGC website explains the dates they include in this definition). It therefore cannot be used to trace people named on a war memorial who served but survived the war, or people who served in conflicts other than the World Wars.

- **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. You could visit with children 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. Local newspapers from the time of the war or the memorial's creation often provide detailed information on the background to the memorial and obituaries for those it commemorates.

- **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 primary school pupils may need support searching for the correct information and understanding it.

b. Advanced research

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- **Census, birth, marriage and death records**

If you know the name and age of the person you are researching, using the census and parish birth, marriage and death registers can reveal additional information about the person, their family and background prior to and, if applicable, after the war. Parish registers are often 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 children because the records are transcribed, but some do require a fee or the use of bought 'credits' to be able to access the information. Further details of such websites can be found at www.learnaboutwarmemorials.org/links. Please note that census records are only 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.

What to do with your research

War Memorials Trust's primary lesson plans offer detailed suggestions for how your pupils' research into the names on war memorials might 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. This will give them the opportunity to display their work and develop presentational skills, as well as creating valuable community links.

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