

5. What can we learn from war memorials?



War Memorials Trust

Background: This is the first in a short series of lessons examining what we can learn from war memorials about people and places in the past. The lessons and resources can be adapted by teachers to be made suitable for your own locality and can help you teach the local history requirements of the new National Curriculum. This lesson focuses on what memorials themselves tell us about the people who are commemorated on them and pupils are encouraged to consider the memorial as a source of historical information and use it to pose and answer historical questions about the local area, its people and what happened to them in the past. There is the opportunity to visit a local war memorial if this has not been done previously, and you may need to allow some extra time for this.

Suitable for: Key Stage 2

Learning objectives: Pupils will learn:

- That war memorials can be used to find out about the past
- Some information about the history of a local war memorial
- What other sources might tell us about the past

Learning outcomes: Pupils will be able to:

- Explain what we can find out from war memorials
- Ask and begin to answer questions about a war memorial and the people named on it
- Explain which other sources may be suitable for finding further information

Resources: 'What can we learn from war memorials?' primary resource sheet, 'Teachers' information about war memorials' and 'Planning a visit to a war memorial' primary helpsheets, 'What can we learn from war memorials?' PowerPoint, timeline cards examples of sources of information about people named on a local war memorial (if available).

Introduction

What are war memorials?

- Review what war memorials are and their continuing importance to communities, especially as we approach the centenary of the First World War. If previous lessons from War Memorials Trust have been used, then a brief recap of the relevant points of these should be sufficient. Otherwise, discuss the main points on our 'Teachers' information on war memorials' primary helpsheet.
- Depending on what else they have studied and how familiar pupils are with the period of the First World War you may want to explain when it took place and how long ago this was. War Memorials Trust's timeline cards showing the First and Second World Wars in the context of the 20th century may be helpful for this.

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Information that can be seen on war memorials

- Slide 4: Give out the 'What can we learn from war memorials?' primary resource sheet and give pupils five minutes to look at the pictures and write down what they can see and the information they can get from the memorial. The pictures show a memorial in the form of a stone Eleanor cross with plaques around the lower part of the memorial – these list the names of the fallen from the First and Second World Wars. A further plaque also commemorates the Korean War. The inscriptions around the top of the memorial (which can be seen in the pictures on the resource sheet) dedicate the memorial to the fallen and indicate who erected it, as well as listing some of the places where fighting occurred and their distances from the memorial's location.

Suggested teaching points and activities

What does the memorial tell us?

- Discuss what information can be found on the memorial itself – this includes who it commemorates, when the wars commemorated happened, who erected the memorial, some of the places fought in and where they are, and the community's attitude towards those who died.
- Ask them if we know, for example, who designed the memorial and where the people named on it lived - pupils should come to the conclusion that the actual memorial by itself does not tell them everything.
- Slide 5: Examine your local war memorial in a similar way to find out what it tells us about your local community at the time it was erected. Compare it to the memorial on the resource sheet to show that war memorials are different and reflect the choices of the local community. If a visit to the memorial has previously been done (see primary lesson 3, 'Visiting a war memorial'), using detailed photographs from the visit would be sufficient. If not, pupils should study the memorial to find out what we can learn from it about the people it commemorates and the community that created it. Further guidance on using the memorial as a basis for a local study is given in lesson 7 of this sequence, 'War memorials and the local area.'

What else can we try to find out?

- Slide 6: Having established what your local war memorial does tell them (e.g. the names of those who died), pupils should pose further questions about the people named on the memorial that they do not know the answer to. These questions can form the basis of research in later lessons. Questions might include ideas about the person's age, job, where they live and who their family was.
- Slide 7: Discuss what other sources may be required to find the answers to these questions. Compare the value of these other sources of information – ask pupils what we might learn about the person from, for example, a photo or information about where they lived/worked – is this more useful than the war memorial? Show some examples of these sources if possible and give pupils time to consider each one. A carousel activity might be suitable for this, depending on the type and number of sources you are able to provide. If it is not possible to provide any example sources, a short discussion about them will suffice.

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Conclusion

- Explain that the next lessons will focus on how to use these to find out about the past and answer the questions they have come up with.

Support/extension:

The activities in this lesson plan are suggestions only, and teachers will need to adapt the lesson to take account of the needs of their class.

- Alongside or instead of the resource sheet, older or more able children could study more challenging war memorials that contain less 'obvious' information.
- More able pupils could carry out a deeper study of a war memorial to a specific group, for example the Memorial to the Women of World War Two in London, the 'Shot at Dawn' memorial at the National Memorial Arboretum in Staffordshire, or the Animals in War memorial in London, to find out what the memorial tells us about that group and public perceptions of them, both at the time of the conflict and since. They can then carry out further research into the memorial and the group which it commemorates and their wider part in war.
- If preferred, or if the local war memorial does not list the names of the fallen, pupils could instead develop questions about another person. This might be a name given from other local records or a family member. If you are planning on letting pupils research their own family it is recommended that you let parents and carers know and are aware of any potentially sensitive individual circumstances.

Ideas for further work:

There are many further opportunities to extend this lesson and link it with other areas of the curriculum:

- Pupils' homework could include some preliminary research using some of the sources that will be used in subsequent lessons. This will give them the opportunity to apply a range of ICT and research/note taking skills.
- Subsequent primary lessons from War Memorials Trust, particularly lesson 6, 'Researching names on war memorials,' and lesson 7, 'War memorials and the local area,' provide further opportunities to find out about local people commemorated on a war memorial and use the memorial as a source of historical and geographical information on the community and the local area.

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