History of Remembrance Day

War Memorials Trust

On this sheet you will learn:

- How Remembrance commemorations have changed since 1919.

History of Remembrance Day

Remembrance Day in the UK takes place on **11th November**, with the formal Act of Remembrance (usually a minute or two of silence) occurring at **11 o' clock**. This was the exact moment the First World War ended in **1918** – the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month.

Today Remembrance Day is widely observed but, like war memorials themselves, the nature of the commemorations and people's attitudes to them have **changed** over the years.

After the initial jubilation at the signing of the Armistice in 1918, the first and second anniversaries of the end of the First World War had a **solemn** rather than victorious atmosphere and focused on **mourning** the dead rather than celebrating victory. The **Cenotaph** in Whitehall, at first a temporary structure but replaced in **1920** with a replica made of Portland stone, quickly became the focus for events as crowds gathered to lay **wreaths**. 11th November 1919 saw the first observance of a minute's **silence** at 11 o' clock, in which the vast majority of people participated, wherever they were and whatever they were doing. A year later, on the same day that the permanent Cenotaph was unveiled, the **Unknown Warrior** was buried in Westminster Abbey to honour ordinary service personnel who had died. This period and the early 1920s was also when most of the **memorials** that commemorate the First World War were erected, as thousands of communities paid tribute to their fallen.

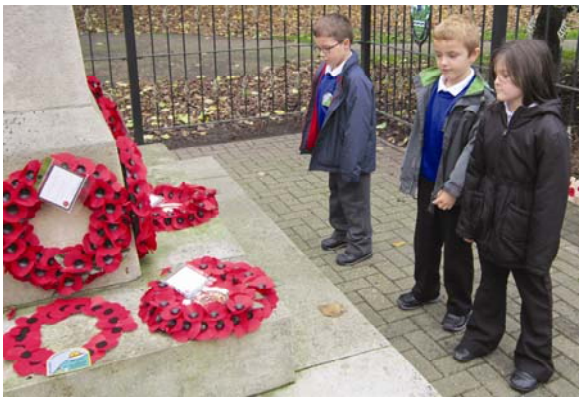
However, other aspects of Remembrance Day emerged as the 1920s continued. In 1921 some ex-servicemen, **angry** at the lack of opportunity and support they had received since returning home and disagreeing with continued concentration on the dead when **survivors** needed help, disrupted the service at the Cenotaph and this was repeated throughout the 1920s. At the same time, some **young** people began holding celebrations on November 11th to celebrate the fact that the war was over and they could have fun once again, although this had begun to **decline** in favour of more sombre events by the mid-1920s.

The Unknown Warrior's coffin passing the newly unveiled Cenotaph in London, 1920.

During the **Second World War** Remembrance commemorations declined as focus **switched** from remembering the previous war to fighting the current one, and after 1945 **both** wars were remembered during services that were held on the Sunday closest to November 11th. Marking the day during church services on a Sunday meant that it was not such a part of **everyday** life as it was when normal activities were suspended at 11 o' clock on whichever day the 11th fell on. People had to make more of an **effort** to participate and as a result interest in marking Remembrance Day declined in the post Second World War years as the conflicts became more **distant**.

However, the end of the twentieth century

saw a **resurgence** of interest in the First World War. This was partly due to declining numbers of veterans and the publication of various books concerning the conflict. This, and the fact that the UK's involvement in more **recent conflicts** has brought the subject sharply back into focus, has contributed to Remembrance Day being given a higher profile once more. The inclusion of the two World Wars on the National Curriculum also means a greater **awareness** of them among a new generation. In the **1990s** the two minute silence began to be held on 11th November itself, regardless of whether it was a Sunday or not. Remembrance therefore became a more **integral** part of daily life on that day once more.



A new generation of children now learn about the World Wars and Remembrance in school © Hillcrest Infant School, 2011.

What happens on Remembrance Day?

Remembrance Day is **widely observed** these days, with two-minute silences often being held at 11 o'clock on the 11th as well as the following Sunday (Remembrance Sunday) if the 11th falls on a different day.

Many people attend Remembrance **services** at local war memorials (you can find out more about war memorials on our 'History of war memorials' information sheet, which is available at www.learnaboutwarmemorials.org/youth-groups/general/11-18). Often, young people take part in these services, with groups such as **Scouts** or **Cadets** taking part in a parade or pupils representing their **school**.

Observance of Remembrance Day often starts before 11th November, when many people buy and wear **poppies**. The tradition of wearing a poppy to symbolise Remembrance began in 1920 and was inspired by the poem, '**In Flanders Fields**,' written by John McCrae in 1915. The opening lines of the poem refer to poppies growing in Flanders, an area of the Western Front, around the graves of soldiers. The poppy came to **symbolise** remembering those who had died during the war and the custom of wearing one became widespread. Many **wreaths** left at war memorials are also made of poppies, as the photo on the left shows, and poppies can also be attached to crosses.

Poppies attached to wooden crosses at the Field of Remembrance, Westminster © War Memorials Trust, 2011

Summary

- Most of the Remembrance Day customs we know and participate in originated after the First World War.
- Observing a **silence** at 11 o'clock on 11th November began in 1919 and wearing **poppies** a year later.
- There was a decline in interest in Remembrance after the Second World War but more recent conflicts, education and various anniversaries mean that more people take part in Remembrance events now than in recent years.