

History of war memorials



War Memorials Trust

On this sheet you will learn:

- What war memorials are and when/why many of them were created.

What are war memorials?

There are thought to be around **100,000** war memorials in the UK. It is likely that you have seen at least one before, but you may not have realised what it was or how **important** it is. You may also have walked past others without noticing them.

A war memorial is an **object** that preserves the **memory** of a war or conflict and those involved in it. It can take any form and be created by anyone at any time. It can be permanent or temporary, be a living thing such as a tree, a building or a more traditional plaque, monument or sculpture. You can find out about different **types** of war memorial at www.learnaboutwarmemorials.org/youth-groups/gallery or by reading our 'Types of war memorial' information sheet, available at www.learnaboutwarmemorials.org/youth-groups/general/11-18.

Who is **commemorated** on war memorials varies. Some list names while others do not; some commemorate individuals and others larger numbers of people. Some war memorials are dedicated to all those who were involved in war whether they died in action, from wounds during or after the conflict, or returned safely. Others commemorate only those who were killed. Some memorials remember civilians affected by conflict.

History of war memorials

Many of our war memorials were created by communities after the end of the **First World War** but the earliest recorded war memorial dates back to the **seventh** century and many, sadly, are still being created or added to because of current conflicts.

Over this long history, there have been various **changes** to war memorials. Before the nineteenth century they were seen as more of a **celebratory** object than one of mourning and sadness. They were built to celebrate great leaders and victories, not to commemorate ordinary servicemen.

This started to change with the **Boer War** of 1899-1902. The public perception of the lower ranks of the Armed Forces and especially of volunteers started to **improve** and more communities created local war memorials to remember all those who had lost their lives. Many of these **individually** listed the names of the fallen, whereas in previous conflicts this was rare.



Coombe Hill Boer war memorial, Buckinghamshire © Buckinghamshire County Council, 2011

However, it is the **First World War** which is usually seen as a turning point for war memorials. Around two-thirds of the war memorials that exist today date back to this war. There are several reasons for this: the sheer **numbers** of casualties; the fact that so many **volunteers** and civilians were affected compared to previous wars; and the ban on **repatriation** of the dead.

With over **700,000** British dead and with many of those fighting being volunteers, the effects of the war were far-reaching. Most communities were affected and there has never, before or since, been such a drive to create memorials to a conflict and those who died fighting it as there was in the aftermath of the First World War.

In addition to this service personnel who died **overseas** were not brought home for burial. The logistical impossibility of doing this when numbers were so high, combined with a belief that the dead should be treated **equally** regardless of rank and wealth, meant that casualties were buried in cemeteries near the battlefields where they died. Many more casualties have no known grave and are commemorated on memorials to the **missing**.

This meant that there were many bereaved families who had no grave as a **focus** for their grief at home and so communities, whether residents of the same area or members of the same workplace, school, church or other group, formed **committees** to create a war memorial to commemorate their dead and the losses they had suffered.



Worthing war memorial during its unveiling in the 1920s, West Sussex © Farthing Collection.

Just over twenty years after the First World War ended the **Second World War** began, and would go on for nearly six years. The Second World War saw fewer military losses than the First, but the nature of the conflict meant more civilian casualties. In the aftermath of the Second World War many communities chose to **add** the names of the fallen to their existing war memorial. Some new ones, however, were and still are created, especially to commemorate specific groups. In the years since 1945 many war memorials have also received further additions as a result of more recent conflicts, such as the **Korean War** and **Afghanistan**.

War memorials today

As we approach the **centenary** of the outbreak of the First World War and

national plans for marking this landmark anniversary are developing, public **interest** in the conflict and in war memorials is increasing further. While the meaning of Remembrance Day has changed over the last century, this centenary is an opportunity to **reflect** on its origins, and war memorials are likely to be an important part of the commemorations.

War Memorials Trust aims to help more people to **understand** war memorials and to protect and conserve them for future generations. We believe this is important because war memorials are a vital **link** to our past; a past that is increasingly beyond **living memory**. Sometimes a war memorial is the only record of the people who fought in these conflicts and if they are lost or damaged then that record of their sacrifice will be lost too.

However, there are various **problems** facing war memorials and it is important that these issues are understood by new generations so that they can be prevented in the future. Information about these issues and how you can help to prevent them can be found in our 'Current issues affecting war memorials' information sheet at www.learnaboutwarmemorials.org/youth-groups/general/11-18.

Summary

- There are **100,000** war memorials in the UK of different varieties. Many were created after the First World War but the earliest dates from the seventh century.
- Many First World War memorials have been added to since they were unveiled and now remember more recent conflicts too.
- War memorials are a **link** to events that are increasingly beyond living memory, and are important **records** of individual sacrifices.