“I have many times asked myself whether there can be more potent advocates of peace upon earth … than this … multitude of silent witnesses to the desolation of war.”
King George V, visiting Belgium in May 1922

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission

Today, the Commonwealth War Graves Commission cares for the graves and memorials of 1.7 million Commonwealth service men and women, across 23,000 sites in more than 150 countries and territories. These men and women were drawn from Britain and the British Empire’s colonies and territories across the world.

There But Not There

There But Not There aims to place a representative figure for as many as possible of the names on local war memorials, around the country, into their place of worship, their school, their workplace or wherever their absence was keenly felt. These transparent silhouettes will be back within their communities for Remembrance 2018, the centenary commemoration of the end of the 1914-1918 First World War.

There But Not There aims to be the defining centenary commemoration of the end of the 1914-1918 war, installed where the men and women came from across the country, back in the communities they left behind.

History

The First World War was unprecedented in its scale and impact. It was fought on land, on sea and in the air; across France, Belgium, Macedonia, Mesopotamia, East Africa, Italy, Turkey, Greece and Palestine. Men, and for the first time, women, were mobilised in numbers greater than ever seen before. Volunteers and conscripts made up the fighting forces. By the end of the war, more than ten million had served for Britain and the Commonwealth.

The First World War is known for trench warfare. It was not the first time trenches had been used in war, but they had never been used on such a large scale or over such a long period of time. Although much is made of the conditions of the trenches, where illness and disease could flourish, this was not the major cause of death.

Men and women were pitted against the weapons of an industrialised war. They faced high-velocity rounds from rifles and machine guns, gas, heavy artillery and high explosive shells. Artillery accounted for the vast majority of casualties. Up to one in ten of the men who served in the forces of Britain and her Empire would die. One million was an unprecedented number of dead.
Where possible, the dead were buried near to where they fell, across the battlefields of Europe, Africa and Asia. The intensity and manner of fighting meant that it was not possible to locate all those who had been killed, or to bury all the bodies. In some places the land was contested over multiple occasions, and this meant that some graves were destroyed in subsequent fighting. As a result, not everyone who died had a known grave, and burial records for those with graves could be incomplete. This caused upset to many families and loved ones.

Development of the CWGC

The formation of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (as it has been known since 1960) can be largely attributed to one man, Fabian Ware. He saw the need for burial records to be properly created and maintained, and championed the creation of permanent places of memorial for the fallen.

At the outbreak of the First World War, he was 45 and too old to fight, so instead volunteered to lead a Red Cross mobile ambulance unit. While serving in France, he and his men began to collect information on where the dead had been buried and to make records of any cemetery in their area. Ware convinced the Red Cross that his team should be given the responsibility for locating and tending any British grave it could find. In 1915, their work was officially recognised by the War Office, and incorporated into the British Army as the Directorate of Graves Registration and Enquiries. In six months they were able to register almost 32,000 graves.

The Commander in Chief of the Army, General (later Field Marshal) Haig wrote in March 1915: “It is fully recognised that the work of this organisation is of purely sentimental value, and that it does not necessarily contribute to the successful termination of the war. It has, however, an extraordinary moral value to the Troops in the Field as well as to the relatives and friends of the dead at home.”

By 1917, the War Graves Commission was created to make and keep official records of the dead, and to design and care for permanent cemeteries and memorials in their honour. The organisation was, and continues to be, jointly funded by the governments of Australia, Canada, India, New Zealand, South Africa and the UK.

From the outset, the Commission set the highest standards for all its work. Three of the most eminent architects of the day were chosen to suggest designs for the cemeteries, headstones, cemetery features, and memorials. Fabian Ware asked Sir Frederic Kenyon, Director of the British Museum, to interpret the differing approaches of the principal architects and advise on architectural treatment and layout. He consulted widely with bereaved families, the clergy, servicemen, the army, architects, artists and
horticulturalists. He developed a set of guidelines which went on to inform the further development of all cemetery and memorial designs. Although each would have its own character, each would also be consistent with the Commission’s aims.

The report Kenyon presented to the Commission in November 1918 emphasised equality as the core ideology, outlining the principles the organisation still abides by today.

The aims were clear:

- Each of the dead should be commemorated by name on a headstone or memorial
- Headstones and memorials should be permanent
- Headstones should be the same
- There should be no distinction made on account of rank, race or faith

In the words of Kenyon’s report, “where the sacrifice had been common, the memorial should be common also…”

The War Graves Commission’s aims were ambitious. Never had such an extensive building programme been attempted. Never before had ordinary servicemen and women had the chance to be commemorated ‘in perpetuity’ or permanently. Never before had men and officers been treated with no distinction owing to class or money. Each and every headstone and monument would be made by hand. Teams of gardeners would work to create places of life and brightness at all times. And the commitment was to keep up this standard forever. Kipling described it as “The biggest single bit of work since any of the pharaohs - and they only worked in their own country.”
Equality of Treatment

The idea of equality of treatment was a central principle of the Commission, but was not universally supported.

Some families felt that they had the right to choose both where and how their loved ones would be memorialised. There was pressure from some families for bodies to be repatriated, so that they could be buried close to home.

Repatriation was banned on several grounds, including prohibitive cost and logistical burden, safety, fears about hygiene and public health, and the impossibility of the task for many whose remains could not be recovered.

Others wished for control over how their family members were memorialised. One example was a petition (containing over 8,000 signatures) requesting that the headstones be shaped as a cross, in recognition of those who had died as Christians.

Public feeling did not always match the feelings of the soldiers themselves. Ware stated that in “ninety-nine cases out of a hundred” the officers (who were normally drawn from the upper classes) “will tell you that if they are killed they would wish to be among their men.”

Arguments in support of equality of treatment were based on a number of different factors. Some were concerned with consistency of appearance, and being able to maintain each and every grave with care. There were very real concerns that any flexibility granted to families to make individual decisions would result in cemeteries where the wealthy and influential would be able to create monuments which reflected “inequality… and disorder”, and where the difference between “rich and poor” would be starkly shown. Others felt that the cemeteries needed to reflect the common sacrifice of the Empire and Commonwealth, or that soldiers who had died together should remain together in death, as a “… community of sacrifice.” To truly reflect the diversity of people who had fought together, religious beliefs and burial customs were to be respected.

Although the work had begun, there was still some public opposition, and people sought to have their opinions heard. Parliament debated the issue at length on 4 May 1920. Viscount Wolmer spoke for the opponents to the plans, and stated that “uniformity is not and never can be equality.” The chief advocate for the Commission’s plans was William Burdett-Coutts. His speech was printed and distributed to reassure and garner public support for their plans. Winston Churchill wrapped up the debate, appealing to the House not to divide on the issue, but rather to allow the Commission ‘to go on with their scheme free from any sense of uncertainty.’

After this debate the work continued as the Commission had always intended: headstones would be uniform, bearing the names, ranks, units and religious symbol of the fallen. Loved ones would be able to include an approved personal inscription as “an expression of personal feeling and affection”.

A stone mason carves the Canadian maple leaf emblem on a headstone. ©CWGC
The Missing

But for half of the “million dead” of the British Empire in the First World War there was no identified grave. Many bodies could not be identified; many were not found at all; many were buried in graves destroyed by later fighting.

It was decided that these men and women “must not be neglected, and some memorial there must be to the lost, the unknown, but not forgotten dead.” After some discussion, it was decided that memorials would be created to bear each name of the hundreds of thousands missing. The architects needed to create enough space for each name to be inscribed, but they also wanted to create places of dignity which did not glorify war.

Many memorials commemorate thousands of individuals: for example, Thiepval Memorial in France bears more than 72,000 names; the Menin Gate in Belgium bears more than 54,000 names.

For those who fought in the air and on the sea, there was often no known grave. Memorials were erected for these servicemen and women also. The vast majority of the Royal Naval dead are commemorated in the UK upon the CWGC’s naval memorials in Chatham, Plymouth and Portsmouth.

Construction

The enormous task of designing the sites began in earnest from 1917. The most prominent architects, engineers and artists of the day were employed to design the layouts and memorials. Horticulturalists were employed to design the planting schemes. Many of the assistant architects and gardeners employed by the Commission were ex-servicemen who had an interest in maintaining the final resting places of their comrades and friends.

Construction began after the Armistice. Temporary wooden crosses were replaced by permanent headstones. Some cemeteries were “concentrated” - isolated and scattered remains were reburied in larger cemeteries - so that the “life of the land could go forward” and all could be “reverently cared for.” Larger cemeteries would include a Cross of Sacrifice and a non-denominational Stone of Remembrance. Large structures capable of bearing the names of thousands of “the missing” were erected.

Rudyard Kipling, Nobel Prize winner for literature and author of The Jungle Book, was appointed as literary advisor. He was tasked with choosing the forms of words which would be used on headstones, other cemetery features, and memorials for those with no known grave. It would take the Commission more than twenty years to complete the building of the cemeteries and memorials.

Official pilgrimages of families and loved ones began to be organised during this time, sometimes with charitable organisations helping to pay the cost for those who could not afford the journey.
The Second World War

By 1938, the building work was mostly completed, and the Commission’s work began to focus more on preservation and maintenance. After the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939, it was not possible to maintain the cemeteries as before, although they were largely unharmed by the conflict. At its conclusion, maintenance of First World War sites began again.

What of the 600,000 servicemen and women from Britain and the Commonwealth who had died in the second great conflict of the 20th Century? These men and women also needed commemoration, and the Commission’s charter was extended to embrace them also. Some memorials were expanded so that additional names could be added (for example, the naval memorials in the UK, such as Chatham), and in some cemeteries the fallen of the Second World War had been buried alongside those of the 1914-1918. In the main, new cemeteries and memorials were created where people had fallen, from Western Europe to the Far East.

The CWGC Today

Today, the work of commemoration continues, with memorials and cemeteries being preserved and maintained and renewed continuously. It was, and remains, a significant financial commitment from the member governments.

Remains of the fallen of both World Wars continue to be discovered, with on average 30 discoveries every year. Each is buried with full military honours in a CWGC cemetery.

As had been intended, the Commission’s cemeteries and memorials are not “places of gloom” but places of “dignity and inspiration”, and they will remain so “in perpetuity”.

For more information on the CWGC’s work today, or to conduct your own research into the fallen of the First and Second World Wars, please visit www.cwgc.org