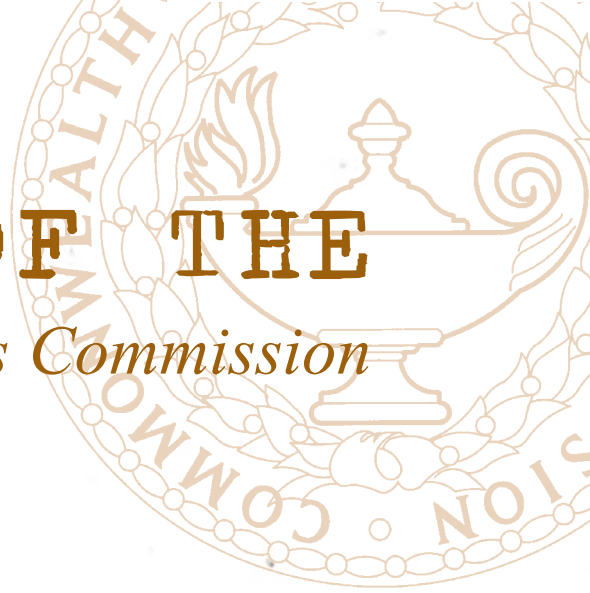


A HISTORY OF THE

Commonwealth War Graves Commission





The Work Begins

The Commission's founder, Fabian Ware, arrived in France in September 1914 to command a British Red Cross Unit. He noted there was no organisation in place to record the final resting places of casualties and became concerned that graves would be lost forever, so his unit took it upon themselves to register and care for all the graves they could find. By 1915 Ware's unit was given official recognition by the War Office, becoming the Graves Registration Commission. The Unit received hundreds of requests from relatives for information or photographs of loved ones' graves - by 1917, 12,000 photographs had been dispatched to relatives.

As the war progressed, Ware, concerned about the fate of the graves once the war was over, became convinced of the need for an official organisation representing the Imperial nature of the war effort, the equality of treatment due to the dead and the permanence of graves or memorials. With the support of The Prince of Wales, Ware submitted a memorandum to the Imperial War Conference in 1917. It was unanimously approved and The Imperial War Graves Commission was established by Royal Charter on 21 May 1917.

From the outset, the Commission sought perfection and permanence for the physical forms of commemoration and settled on three of the most eminent architects of the day to begin the work of design and construction of the cemeteries and memorials - Sir Edwin Lutyens, Sir Herbert Baker and Sir Reginald Blomfield.

Immediately, challenges arose over the type, size, and cost of the cemeteries and memorials the Commission was to build. Sir Frederic Kenyon, Director of the British Museum, had the task of bringing together the differing views. His report, presented to the Commission in November 1918, articulated principles still held by the Commission. In particular, decisions on non-repatriation of remains and private memorials were designed to avoid class distinctions that would conflict with the feeling of 'brotherhood' which had developed between all ranks serving at the Front. The report settled disagreements within the Commission but a bigger storm was brewing. The restriction of personal choice with regard to repatriation and the form of grave markers, led to powerful and vocal opposition.



The memorial to the missing of the Somme at Thiepval, France

The debate on commemoration went to Parliament, reaching its climax on 4 May 1920. The Commission, represented by Members of the House, William Burdett-Coutts and the new Chairman, Winston Churchill, put forward the practicalities of Kenyon's choices and the ideal of a fellowship in death that crossed all boundaries of race, creed or wealth. The opposition insisted on the rights of the individual but Churchill's closing speech touched on the very core of the issue. The Commission was building memorials to commemorate in perpetuity the sacrifice of an Empire's soldiers. Future generations would gaze in wonder upon them and remember. The opposition was withdrawn.

At the end of 1919, The Commission had spent £7,500; twelve months later that figure had risen to £250,000. In France and Flanders alone, over 160 kilometres of walls had been erected using over 280,000 cubic metres of good stone. In 1923 over 4,000 headstones a week were being sent to France and by 1927 more than 500 cemeteries were complete; over 400,000 headstones, 1,000 Crosses of Sacrifice and 400 Stones of Remembrance had been erected and 150,000 names commemorated on memorials.

By the spring of 1921, 1,000 cemeteries had been established and deemed fit to receive visitors. By 1927, over 100 kilometres of hedges had been planted. Today, the Commission has 710 hectares of land under its control, of which 450 is under fine horticultural maintenance.



Construction underway at Coxyde Military Cemetery, Belgium

Originally, three experimental cemeteries were built. Of these, Forceville in France was agreed to be the most successful. It was a walled cemetery with uniform headstones in a garden setting, the Cross of Sacrifice designed by Blomfield representing the faith of the majority and the Stone of Remembrance designed by Lutyens representing those of all faiths and of none. Careful design

ensured that structure and function were complemented by imaginative use of horticulture. With some adjustments, Forceville was to be the template for the building programme.

With so many of the dead lost without trace the Commission was called upon to build numerous memorials between 1923 and 1938. The largest, the Thiepval Memorial in France stands at over 45 metres high and carries the names of over 72,000 casualties from the Battle of the Somme. The memorials signify the Commission's commitment to commemorate individuals.

Mechanisation over the years has increased the speed at which engraving could be done. The latest computerised system will allow a much faster rate of engraving and the finished product is expected to be of a higher standard.



The Commission's latest Incisograph machine in action

The provision of over 500,000 headstones was perhaps the greatest challenge facing the Commission. Apart from finding enough high quality stone, engraving regimental badges and inscriptions was a time-consuming affair. In an early indication of the Commission's willingness to innovate, a Lancashire firm designed for the Commission a machine to trace details onto headstones; this considerably increased the speed of the engraving process.

Millions of plants were grown to transform the cemeteries and soften the seemingly endless rows of headstones. For reasons of economy, the Commission established its own nurseries. Started in 1919, the building programme was not completed until 1938.

A contractor engraving by hand at a workshop in the United Kingdom





The Second World War: Starting Afresh

Just one year later, war once more engulfed Europe and, although the Commission had gained from its previous experience, the task of burial and commemoration was to prove no less daunting. Learning the sad lessons of the First World War, the Services organised graves registration units from the start and early on land was earmarked for use as cemeteries. However, the Commission also recognised the changing face of warfare. The increased use of air power meant that casualties were no longer restricted to military personnel. Ware urged the commemoration of all civilian deaths caused by enemy action and this took the form of a roll of honour, which on completion numbered over 66,000 names. In 1956 it was placed near St George's Chapel at Westminster Abbey, London. A new page is turned every day.

As the tide of war moved in the Allies' favour, the Commission was able to return to many of its 1914 - 1918 cemeteries and memorials; thankfully, most were undamaged structurally but in many cases horticultural work had to start again. Remarkably, within three years, the pre-war standards had almost been restored.

Once more, the Commission took on the challenge of construction work to commemorate the 600,000 Commonwealth dead of this latest conflict. Over 350,000 headstones were required. In Normandy alone, almost 25 kilometres of concrete beams were needed to hold headstones. However, by October 1956, 90% of graves were marked with a permanent headstone.

The Dieppe Canadian War Cemetery, completed in 1949, was the first of the Second World War cemeteries to be finished. However, a shortage of men, tools and machinery, coupled with post-war unrest in some regions and the fact that even in 1956 bodies were still being recovered from the route of the 'Death Railway' in Burma, meant that construction work was not finished until the 1960s. In all, the Commission built 559 new cemeteries, and thirty-six new memorials to add to those cemeteries and memorials built after 1918.

After more than four years of horticultural neglect, work gets underway to restore Tyne Cot Cemetery in Belgium

With another 600,000 names to be added to records already in excess of 1,100,000, the Commission kept pace with the task of recording the names and details of Second World War casualties. In 1947 over 60% were accounted for and by 1959 over 400,000 names were recorded and over 100,000 registers had been produced for the public.



An office of the Directorate of Graves Registration and Enquiries in 1922

Originally, casualty data was stored on card indexes which required over 3,000 drawers. After the First World War details were compiled into some 1,500 registers. In 1995 the Commission's records were computerised giving an operator better access to the 1,700,000 names commemorated by the Commission. Single casualties can be traced more quickly, from less information and additional services, such as regimental or home-town reports are now offered.

The Commission also reorganised its structure to cope with the increased (in terms of numbers and geographical spread) task of commemoration. War Graves Agreements were extended or established with the countries where the Commission had to carry out the bulk of its work and international committees were formed. In 1956 a Commonwealth, German and French Joint Committee meeting was held in London. The Commission recognised that the name 'Imperial' in its title was not in tune with the post war strengthening of national and regional feelings and in 1960 the name of the organisation was changed to the "Commonwealth War Graves Commission".

After the war, traditional horticultural standards were applied to the Commission's sites around the globe, but greater use of machinery brought different ways of working and savings in costs. Horticultural staff tested new varieties of plants to cope with extremes of climate, they trained local labour and in areas where cemeteries and memorials were close to one another, mobile maintenance groups were used to cover a number of locations, thus allowing greater rationalisation of staff and machinery.

The future holds new challenges for the Commission: an unchanging job in a changing world and a need to communicate the value and meaning of the cemeteries and memorials to a world-wide audience, an increasing majority having little knowledge of the two world wars, let alone of the meaning of commemoration.

Throughout the past ninety years, the Commission, in the interests of maintaining the highest standards appropriate to those commemorated, has met the challenges of construction, maintenance, conservation, development and innovation. In so doing it has recruited and supported a committed work force, used the most cost-effective methods associated with machinery, technology, staff organisation, contracting and materials. The challenge to continuously improve its operations and management remains and the Commission is dedicated to meeting that challenge with the same vigour it brings to the task of remembering the 1,700,000 Commonwealth men and women who died.



Chungkai War Cemetery, Thailand