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THE R H 7 HISTORY GROUP

IMPERIAL WAR GRAVES COMMISSION

The Imperial War Graves Commission was given a Royal Charter on the 21st May 1917 and was renamed the Commonwealth War Graves Commission in 1960. It was the inspiration of Fabian Ware whose determination carried the project through to its conclusion. It now cares for 23,000 locations in 150 countries honouring 1,700,000 dead and missing servicemen from the first and second World Wars and subsequent conflicts.

Here are the background details to this extraordinary achievement.

Major General Sir Fabian Ware was born on the 17th June, 1869 in Clifton, Bristol and attended the University of London and also Paris. His main interest was education and he worked as an assistant schoolmaster and became Acting Director of Education in the Transvaal. This was followed by becoming the Director of Education on the Transvaal Legislative Council. He returned to England in 1905 and was appointed editor of the *Morning Post*. He was knighted for his creation of the IWGC and died on the 29th April, 1949 at Amberley in Gloucester.

Pre-1914 In the past the 'other ranks' of our army have been formed from various sources - from young boys looking for adventure, those escaping from poverty or being sent by their families who could no longer afford to look after them, young men looking for a career, criminals escaping from the law and those who were giving the choice at a trial – the army or hanging or transportation.

Our wars took place in other people's countries and once the men had gone the families heard nothing more of their fate, if they were 'missing' or how, where and when they died. If that had happened then hardened men just left the bodies or they were thrown in a pit. The graves were unmarked and the men forgotten.

It was not until the Boer War that consciences began to be stirred regarding next-of-kin and Charities were formed to give support and some financial help to widows and children.

First World War: Our professional army was small and was bolstered by Kitchener's New Army – an army of civilians who had joined at the beginning of the War for patriotic reasons, thinking it would be a bit of excitement, would soon be over and they would be home again. They had no desire to be soldiers, killing someone was abhorrent to them and many were never able to escape from the guilt they felt for having done so.

It was even worse to have men die beside them, in some cases, as with the Pals Units, men they knew so well. So they buried them, marked the grave with a cross and grieved.

So it was the soldiers themselves who led the way to this different thinking, of treating the bodies with respect and marking the place where they lay.

The creation of the IWGC: Fabian Ware was regarded as too old to enlist so he joined the British Red Cross and went to France with an Ambulance Unit. Here he became concerned that all the dead should be recorded with as much detail as possible together with the position of their grave and to ensure this he arranged that as his unit attended to wounded men so they noted the burials. Like all Ambulance Units the men worked in great danger rescuing and attending the wounded under gun fire. Ware's Unit added to that danger locating, recording and burying the dead – and burying the dead was essential not only as a matter of respect but also with regard to hygiene and on behalf of the living.

The French also asked for help and Ware not only searched for and recorded French casualties but also rescued civilians caught in the battle. He established a very good relationship with the French which helped him later in negotiating land for the cemeteries. He emphasised the kindness he had found, the concern shown for the soldiers, the way the people had buried the dead on their land and in their gardens and tended the graves, and he was angered at what he considered to be condescending treatment by some British officers.

Ware tried to keep a distance from the Army but as casualties increased drastically it was felt he should be in the Army and not working separately from it. He was, therefore, made up to Major and soldiers also started recording the graves. Ware established the Graves Registration Commission, the Red Cross continued to supply men and vehicles and the Army was responsible for crosses, rations and fuel but eventually the work load became too great and the Red Cross withdrew.

The GRC then became an official part of the Army and by the end of 1915 Ware had successfully negotiated with first the French and then the Belgians for land to be leased 'In perpetuity' for the development of war graves. Having done so, Ware pressed for negotiations to be completed immediately so once the war was over work could begin. He felt the British should take responsibility for all the preliminary work such as surveying, obtaining consent of councils and sanitary authorities

Ware had also agreed with the French that the British would be responsible for the development and maintenance of the cemeteries and so plans started to take shape. First the work of the GRC became public and it began to receive letters asking for photographs. By May 1916, 50,000 British and Imperial graves had been recorded and by 1917, 17,000 photographs had been sent to relatives. The GRC changed its name to the Directorate of Graves Registration and Enquiries and extended its work to Salonika, Egypt and Mesopotamia.

Concern then developed regarding the permanence of soldiers' graves after the War and in January 1916 the National Committee for the Care of Soldiers Graves was established with representatives from the GRC, the British and French armies, the relevant

Government Departments and, in September, representatives for all the Empire. The Headquarters moved from France to London.

A list of things to be considered shows the complexity. Included was the dimensions and spacing of graves; chaplains to be responsible for marking to ensure identification; particulars to be written in hard black lead not indelible pencil; pegs to be placed at 45 degrees to grave; labels on underside as protection from weather (if there was any difficulty in placing crosses then a record had to be placed in a bottle which was to be half-buried, neck down); in authorised cemeteries numbered pegs to be used to mark where graves were to be dug, the numbers had be on the burial returns.

There were other sensitive considerations too which were meticulously observed – the many different traditions regarding burial i.e. Jewish, Muslim, Sikh, Hindu, Indian Christian, Egyptian Copts, Chinese Labour Corps, South African Native Troops, West Indian.
As an example here are revised 1918 instructions for the burying of Chinese:

"To be buried on sloping ground with a stream below or a gully down which water always or occasionally passes. The Grave should not be parallel to north, south, east or west. This is especially important to Chinese Mohammedans. It should be about 4 feet deep with head towards the hill and feet towards the water. A mound about 2 feet high is piled over the grave. Whenever possible friends of the deceased should be allowed access to the corpse and allowed to handle it as they like to dress it and show respect."

There was another particular sensitive issue – the Army buried executed men in isolated places with the graves marked with bare crosses. Ware discovered some of these and referred the matter to the War Cabinet which resulted in the men being merged with the others but the Army insisted that only the word DEAD should be on the cross. This was considered as marking the men beyond life and of a great distress to relatives and consequently altered.

The burials and markings were essential for the War was still continuing and the battles were fought back and forth, which makes all the work done seem useless, but if all that burying and recording had not been done then after the War the tally of the men whose fate remained unknown would have been even higher.

The work of the Committee expanded to Palestine, Egypt, Mesopotamia, Salonika, Gallipoli, Italy and Russia. Also, as the War drew to a close on the Western Front small cemeteries were formed with simple wooden crosses and to relieve the starkness of these Ware invited Arthur Hill, assistant director at Kew, to tour the graves and advise on a systematic programme of planting. By 1918 Hill had inspected 200 cemeteries and had four nurseries and an increasing number of assistance from officers, gardeners and the Women's Auxiliary Corps. There was also pressure from the Dominions for particular plants but Hill had to point out that most would not grow in Europe. However, Kew did have some success with maple seeds from Canada and shrubs from New Zealand.

In 1917 the Imperial War Graves Commission was formed and granted a Royal Charter under which its remit would go beyond the Western Front to "maintaining any grave on

land and sea, to acquire land for graves and to erect permanent memorials in the cemeteries and elsewhere, and also to keep records and registers and administer the funds, and control what could be erected in the cemeteries under its control".

With so much in place work started immediately so that once the War ended the building could begin without delay.

In 1917 Fabian Ware had appointed Sir Frederic Kenyon, the Director of the British Museum, and he now put in hand the proposals regarding the laying out of the cemeteries, architecture etc.

Sculptors were appointed for the carving of the head stones. Also three eminent architects whose combined and clashing egos were going to cause problems - Herbert Baker, Reginald Blomfield and Edwin Lutyens, which was interesting as there had been friction between Baker and Lutyens since the latter was chosen to create the Government building in New Delhi. Other architects were appointed for other regions, each with assistants.

In 1920 three experimental cemeteries were built with a surrounding wall, Blomfield's Cross of Sacrifice and Lutyen's Stone of Remembrance. From these it was seen that expenses had to be reduced. The cemeteries follow the same pattern all over the world with the exception of those in Russia, the Middle and Far East, where either the soil will not support vertical headstones or the area is subject to earthquakes. Here the grave is marked by a plaque resting on a short pedestal.

The Cross of Sacrifice, by Blomfield, was designed to reflect the type of medieval cross found in many English churchyards. They are in all cemeteries of over 400 graves. Lutyen's Stone of Remembrance is in any cemetery with more than a thousand burials. They are devoid of any symbolism and carry the simply phrase "Their Name Liveth for Evermore" which was submitted by Rudyard Kipling and is taken from the "tribute to famous men" in Ecclesiastes.

The cemeteries eventually symbolised the waste of war but at the time Kenyon had so many diverse opinions to reconcile. Sigrid Sassoon put the thoughts into words but he was not the only one who regarded the War as "A crime against humanity". There were those who questioned the justification of spending so much on war graves - in other words very similar to the local problems regarding memorials.

Then there were the very personal problems. There were letters in the press regarding the bodies not coming home and also about all the headstones being a basic shape, with no crosses allowed, other than those carved on the stone itself. The letters are full both of grief and resentment and are only too understandable but there is one from a lady regarding the burials disregarding rank and all mixed together. She is protesting stridently that her officer husband is buried "Among the dregs of Society". However there was one other stipulation which caused a considerable problem. The IWGC stated the graves were for the soldiers only, i.e. wives could not be buried with them. When it was discovered that this also applied to those who were buried in Britain there was a surge of protest. One has to agree that in this instance the IWGC does seem to be exceeding its authority. It was the Navy that highlighted the difficulty. A naval war

widow had written to the Admiralty regarding her husband's IWGC grave in the Naval Cemetery at the Haslar Hospital, pointing out that wives were buried there with their husbands so why was she not allowed to be just because his grave was marked by an IWGC headstone? The letter was a very emotional one and later she wrote yet another, saying her health was failing and to give her peace of mind she wanted to know she could be buried with her husband. Her distress is understandable and the problem was complicated by the fact it was a naval graveyard with its own traditions. Presumably one way of solving it would have been to have refused that type of headstone but that does not seem to have been suggested. In view of the fact that the Commission wanted every man to be recorded and to control its cemeteries and the Navy had given them the land to do so a solution seemed difficult. Then a second widow wrote on the same theme. The Admiralty then decided that the graveyard was naval property and the widows would be granted their wishes. The Sea Lords had spoken.

Once the work on creating the cemeteries got under way the enormity of the problem surfaced. It seemed as if all minds were concentrated on the plans and preparation but now the hard work began. By 1921, 1000 cemeteries were ready for headstones and burials.
Between 1920 and 1923, 4000 headstones were shipped to France. The Commission also had to commemorate the missing. If a man was buried without any information being found he was "Known only to God", if no body was found but there was enough information to name him he is shown on one of the memorials for which the Commission was responsible.
Blomfield's Menin Gate was the first to be unveiled on the 24th July, 1927 but there was not enough space for all the names and 34,984 names of the missing are inscribed on Herbert Baker's Tyne Cot Memorial.

There is another aspect to this – for the sculptors, the gardeners, the bricklayers, masons etc. it was a reasonable occupation in itself, however depressing it may have been, particularly if a member of the family had died, but there were men having to do what must have been the most awful work imaginable – those searching for the missing, trying to find clues to their name, involved in exhumations. While the fighting was still continuing this was done by men detailed within a regiment but after the War the groups were made up of men not yet demobbed, the wounded who had not yet been returned to the Front when the Armistice was signed and the young men who had enlisted but were not yet fully trained and, therefore had not experienced the horrors in France and Belgium. They all became part of the Labour Corps.

Those men searching for the bodies and then trying to identify the corpse or the remains had the most gruesome task. They had to search in the disintegrating clothing, feeling in the pockets, looking for pocket book, watch, letters, rings, photos, identity disc (if found one to be left with the body, the other put with the effects). All this was put in a small bag, sealed and labelled. The boots were checked – sometimes the make, perhaps a date, even the tread may lead to establishing an identity. Some bodies lay in swamps, some had disintegrated badly. Among the recovered wounded were men who found themselves back where they fought, knowing that among the fetid remains could be men they knew. The searchers became ill, some developed all the symptoms of neurasthenia – and it is interesting how those symptoms started to show in so many differing circumstances such as with one of the sailors in the William Dart party at Baku.

It seems these men who were doing such appalling work were not honoured – they do not appear to have even been represented at any unveiling ceremony.

Burials during the War had been mostly behind or on the lines but the successful German "push" was overwhelming with not only 350,000 more Allied deaths but the existing graves had been destroyed. Then, when the Germans came to a halt the battles were fought all over again, back over the same ground, thus leaving thousands more dead, missing or unidentified.
Which leads to the grotesque situation at the war cemetery of St Symphorien near Mons and the last battle in which one of our village men would die. He was Edward Fry of Dormansland. He died on the 26th October, 1918 – so near the end. He was 24.

Special mention must be made of this Military Cemetery. After the first battle of Mons in 1914 a Belgian landowner gave land for the Germans to bury their dead. They also buried the British dead so the cemetery contains the first German and the first Briton to die. Then in 1918 the German "push" ended here and the last Briton and the last German to die are buried here. Four years and millions dead, towns in ruins and the countryside ravaged and they were back where they started. To borrow a phrase from the Second World War – "Was their journey really necessary?"

There were other deaths – a Canadian was killed in Mons by a sniper, commanding officers who did not advise their men "to keep their heads down" up to 11 a.m. on Armistice Day were guilty of hundreds of unnecessary deaths and a German was killed by a sniper at 11 o'clock on the 11th November, 1918.

Before the War was over there was urgent need for some people to see and fix the exact spot of death before it was covered over. Inevitably there were those who saw a means of making a profit. Advertisements appeared in personal columns offering photographs of individual war graves in France and Flanders at 30/- for 3 prints. Companies accepted commissions to place flowers and wreaths on graves. Prices for packaged trips to the "Devastated areas" included hotels and cars and a guide to create the "right atmosphere". Michelin Tyre Company published guide books of the battlefields before the end of the war with descriptions for the Somme such as "Climbing the town ramparts at the entrance to the gate there is a magnificent panorama of the obliterated city of Lille" or of Marquelise –"where the old chateau opposite the church is in ruins" and if the foot path opposite the church is taken there is another "fine panoramic view", this time of the battlefield, "the scene of desperate fighting". How ghoulish can you get? Not only were these the places of appalling loss of life they were also where families had lived, made a living and were lost. As farmers returned to try to restore their land many were killing by unexploded shells. The same happened to many tourists who wandered aimlessly. What is more, the IWGC had started work but there were still bodies to be seen. People were critical of Michelin – it was felt from their advertisements their main point was the selling of their tyres.

After the War other tours were arranged for the next-of-kin. The Churches and the Salvation Army provided cheaper visits but eventually had to increase their prices as accommodation costs in France and Belgium increased.
Then this poem appeared in 1918, bitterly ironic, written by Philip Johnston, a non-de-plume for Lieutenant John Purvis who was invalided out of the Army having been

wounded on the Somme. He returned to teaching, then took Holy Orders. Awarded the OBE for his work on the York Minster archives. He died in 1968.

HIGH WOOD
Ladies and Gentlemen, this is High Wood,
Called by the French, Bois des Furneaux,
The famous spot which in 1916,
July, August and September, was the scene
Of long and bitterly contested strife,
By reason of its high commanding site.
Observe the effect of shell-fire in the trees
Standing and fallen, here is wire, this trench
For months inhabited, 12 times changed hands,
(They soon fall in) used later as a grave.
It has been said on good authority
That in the fighting for this patch of wood
Were killed somewhere above 8,000 men
Of whom the greater part are buried here.
The mound on which you stand being… Madam, please,
You are requested kindly not to touch
Or take away the Company's property
As souvenirs, you'll find we have on sale
A large variety, all guaranteed.
As I was saying, all is as it was.
This is an unknown British officer,
The tunic having lately rotted off.
Please follow me – this way… The *path*, sir, please
The ground which was secured at great expense
The Company keeps absolutely untouched
And in the dug-out (genuine) we provide
Refreshments at a reasonable rate.
You are requested not to leave about
Paper or ginger beer bottles or orange peel.
There are waste paper baskets at the gate.

And one interesting light on the times regarding people travelling through Kent – this by-law was added in 1921:- *If any person on any public coach or other public carriage for the conveyance of passengers or on any coach, brake, waggonette, or any other vehicle hired or used for the conveyance of pleasure parties and the like:- Shall blow any horn or use any other noisy instrument or make or combine with any other person or persons to make any loud singing or outcry while passing through any town, village or hamlet to the annoyance or interruption of residents.*
Or shall, while passing through any town etc. throw any money to be scrambled for by children or other person on the road or footway.
Or shall, while on any highway attach to or hang from the vehicle any streamer, balloon or similar article in such a manner as to cause danger to traffic or injury to any person using the highway
They would be fined £5 for each offence as would the conductor and the person hiring or owning the vehicle unless they could prove they had no way of stopping the offence.

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission now keeps a world-wide check on all its graves and with the help of the Commonwealth's individual Offices ensures the sites are properly maintained, rebuilding if necessary. Wars in the Middle East have caused particular problems. The cemetery at Kut-al-Amara has been repaired but it is still impossible for the Commission to visit Amara (these are two separate towns) which has been desecrated. John Seal of Dormansland is buried there.

Many people now visit war graves, for a variety of reasons. There is even a Tripadvisor web site. It is hoped that the foregoing has highlighted the courage, determination, emotions and difficulties that were part of the construction of these sites and that visitors can now look at them not just with modern eyes but also understand what they meant at the time.

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