The origins of the Cenotaph

By the end of the First World War over 1,100,000 men from Great Britain and the British Empire had died in the conflict – every community and family sharing to some degree in the grief for those lost lives.

At an early stage in the war a decision had been taken not to repatriate any of the bodies of the fallen, but to bury them in war cemeteries near to where they fell. Furthermore, it was the shocking intensity of the warfare on the Western Front,
almost half of the fallen had simply disappeared. Many of the dead who were found could not be identified, and had to be interred anonymously.

None of the grieving families had graves to visit at home. Instead, across Britain and its Empire many thousands of war memorials were built in the post-war years, including private memorials to individuals, memorial crosses in parish churchyards, and municipal monuments in almost every town and city. Individual regiments and other military groups and formations built monuments to their dead, several of which are in central London. However, the Cenotaph in Whitehall has always had a pre-eminent place as the nation’s main place of commemoration of its war dead. The scale of loss and bereavement demanded a more fitting response in each community and at a national level.

Before the 20th century, war memorials in England, as in the United Kingdom generally, had mostly been conceived as memorials to victory. Wealth and social rank usually determined which individuals were commemorated – many churches and cathedrals have monuments to commanders and officers who had fallen in combat. There were almost no monuments to the common soldiers and sailors who had died and were buried in unmarked graves overseas, or at sea. A few memorials were erected to the dead of the Crimean War (1853–6) and the Second Boer War (1899–1902) showing that attitudes were beginning to change. After the Great War the scale of the loss and bereavement demanded a more fitting response in each community and at a national level. Lutyens was apparently already thinking of designs for a war memorial in an abstract form – a sketch by him of a
design similar to the eventual Cenotaph is dated 4 June 1919. He developed his design very quickly: it was approved on 7 July, leaving only 11 days for it to be built by the Office of Works’ contractors. The wood, plaster and canvas memorial was unveiled on 18 July on the present site outside the Foreign Office building in Whitehall. It formed one of a number of foci for the Victory Parade the following day.

The Cenotaph made a deep impression on the public and within a couple of days over a million people had visited it, a great many of them laying wreaths there. Lutyens’s subtle design responded perfectly to the national sense of grief and loss. Two days after the parade, The Times observed that:

“The Cenotaph is only a temporary structure made to look like stone, but Sir Edwin Lutyens’ design is so grave, severe
and beautiful that one might well wish it were indeed of stone and permanent”.

**The permanent monument**

The public’s wish for the first Cenotaph to be replaced with a permanent version was unforeseen, but it was widespread and very strong. An alternative location on Horse Guards was considered, but Lutyens favoured the existing Whitehall site and on 30 July 1919 the Cabinet approved the idea of a permanent monument there.

The design of the permanent version was very similar to that of the first, but when Lutyens sent his designs to Sir Alfred Mond on 1 November 1919, he wrote:

“I have made slight alterations to meet the conditions demanded by the setting out of its lines on subtle curvatures, the difference is almost imperceptible, yet sufficient to give it a sculpturesque quality and a life, that cannot pertain to rectangular blocks of stone”.

The permanent monument was built in Portland stone by the contractors Holland, Hannen & Cubitt for the Office of Works. It was unveiled by King George V at 11am on 11 November 1920, the second anniversary of the Armistice. In the same ceremony, the remains of an anonymous British soldier, exhumed from a war cemetery in France, were interred in Westminster Abbey to form the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. Within a week, the Cenotaph had been visited by over one and a quarter million people, and was 10 feet deep in flowers.
Thereafter, each year on Armistice Day, the main national ceremony of remembrance was held at the Cenotaph. During the Second World War, the main service was moved to the nearest Sunday to 11 November to avoid disruption to industry, and in 1946 the Sunday was formally adopted as Remembrance Day – embracing both world wars and subsequent conflicts. The Cenotaph has remained the setting for the national ceremony ever since.

**Design of the Cenotaph**

Lutyens’s original 1919 design was for a tall pylon supporting a sarcophagus or coffin, adorned with laurel wreaths and the flags of the armed services. The permanent Cenotaph is very similar to the first, but is made of white Portland stone with subtle adjustments. His design methods were based on those of the ancient Greek architects of the Parthenon. Using these Classical proportions, all the surfaces subtly curve so that the verticals would meet at a point 1,000 feet above the ground, and the horizontals 900 feet to the side.

The design of the monument guides the eye upwards in a spiral motion: from the plinth, to the words ‘The Glorious Dead’, the flags on the sides, the dates of the war and the laurel wreaths – carved by the sculptor Francis Derwent Wood – and finally up to the sarcophagus on top. The sarcophagus is emphasised by its top-moulding which casts a shadow, and a third wreath is visible on top.

During the design process Lutyens made several sketches with variations including a figure of a fallen soldier, figures of lions and a flaming urn on top, but these were all dropped.
from the design.[6] Indeed, the genius of the Cenotaph as a memorial lies in its abstraction as much as its visual perfection. With no human figure and no national or religious imagery, it can have meaning for people of all races and of all faiths – or none.

Lutyens wanted to have sculpted flags on the sides, rather than real ones, but in this one respect the government disagreed. As a result the Cenotaph is dressed with the flags of Britain’s armed services which are periodically renewed. Lutyens’s vision was of a monument that would be
universal in its significance. The flags make it a national memorial, with specific military connotations. The Cenotaph can be read in both these ways – and in others.

Acknowledgments – Steven Brindle, English Heritage,

On this Day – November 8

1915

Drastic criticism in the House of Lords of the Government’s measures, especially the Press Censorship.

1918

Marshal Foch receives the German armistice delegates at Rethondes (four miles from Compiegne), refuses request for provisional armistice, the terms of armistice to be accepted or refused by 11 am on the 11th November 1918.

1939

A bomb intended to kill Hitler explodes at the annual meeting of the veterans of the 1923 Nazi Putsch in Munich,
but he had ended his speech early and left the building 8 minutes before the explosion in the beer cellar. The German media accused Britain of orchestrating the assassination attempt on Hitler. Two British SIS agents, Major Richard Stevens and Captain S. Payne Best, are captured in Holland by the Germans.

1940

The Royal Navy Home Fleet under Adm/Flt Sir Charles Forbes, aboard his flagship HMS Nelson, accompanied by her sister HMS Rodney, was at sea in the Atlantic engaged in a desperate hunt for the German heavy cruiser Admiral Scheer.

Italians begin big offensive in Albania.
RAF bomb Munich shortly after Hitler appears there.

1941

Army Group North advances across the Volkhov river and captures Tikhivin. Hitler claims Russian losses are 8 – 10 million, which is perhaps double the truth.

1942

After three months of slow advance, the Germans reached the Volga river, capturing 90% of Stalingrad.

On the anniversary of the 1923 Beer Hall Putsch in Munich, Hitler tells his old comrades that Stalingrad is practically in German hands, adding that he didn’t want to take that city
just because it happens to bear the name of Stalin.

Operation ‘Torch’ begins with Anglo-American forces under Lieutenant General Eisenhower landing in Morocco and Algeria against minimal Vichy French resistance. Mersa Matruh is re-taken by British. See HMS Walney – notes below and in today’s Roll of Honour.

1943

Hitler in his last speech to Nazi Party says “We shall go on fighting past 12 o’clock”.

The Eighth Army gains the heights on the Sangro less than 100 miles East of Rome.

1944

For the first time in the history of the Third Reich, Hitler fails to appear in Munich to address “the Old Fighters” on the anniversary of the 1923 Beer Hall Putsch. Speculation mounts as Himmler reads a speech in the Fuhrer’s place. 25,000 Jews are forced to walk over 100 miles in rain and snow from Budapest to the Austrian border, followed by a second forced march of 50,000 persons, ending at Mauthausen Concentration camp.

Notes on today’s Roll

HMS Walney – Operation Torch
Capt. Frederick Peters in command of sloop HMS Walney, led his ship and HMS Hartland through the boom defences of Oran Harbour in Algeria. Under heavy fire he put Walney alongside and disembarked troops, earning a Victoria Cross. Photo below.

Walney (above) was sunk by gunfire within Oran Harbour after first ramming both the outer and inner booms during Operation Reservist. Walney was accompanied by her sister ship HMS Hartland in their attempt to capture the harbour.

On board the Walney when she was sunk were 200 men of
the 6th US Armoured Infantry Division and a 35-strong US Naval contingent under the command of Lt.Cdr. George Deane Dickey USN aboard, and 6 US Marines.

There were only 14 survivors from the crew of the Walney itself, one officer (Lt. Wallace Dempsey Mosely RN) and 13 ratings. The commanding officer of the operation A/Captain Frederick Thornton Peters DSO, DSC, VC, RN also survived.

Two men from NI were among 81 of Walney’s crew who went down with the ship along with all but a few of the troops carried aboard. The ship’s captain Lt.Cdr. Peter Capel Meyrick, RN was blown to bits on the bridge by a shell, which also killed fifteen other officers and ratings gathered there. The only one to survive on the bridge was A/Captain Frederick Thornton Peters. See 1942 in Roll of Honour.
Roll of Honour
November 8

Representing their comrades who died on this day

1914

+CLARKE, James Herbert

+HANVEY, William

+McCORMICK, Samuel
Park, wrote home to say "a young man named McCormick, of Killowen, has been killed." No official notification had been received and Samuel's worried family contacted the War Office. They learned that in the official report of 25/11/1914, Samuel had been returned as missing since 7th November. It was not until February 1915 that Mary McCormick received an official letter confirming her husband had been killed. Born at Pates Lane, Coleraine 12/04/1891, son of John and Martha Jane McCormick (nee Galbraith). Husband to Mary, 4 Strand Road, Coleraine. They married on 27/02/1914 at Coleraine Registrar Office. Ploegsteert Memorial, Belgium.

1916

+JOHNSTON, Arthur Wesley

+SEMPLE, William

+SHAW, John Westleigh
Royal Garrison Artillery 125th (C.P.) (Co Palatine) Heavy Battery, Royal Garrison Artillery. Gunner L448. Died
08/11/1916. Age 22. Enlisted 08/05/1915 and posted to Lytham St Annes, Lancashire on the 10th aged 21 years, civilian occupation, commercial traveller. Born at Crumlin, County Antrim, Ireland, gave his residence as care of J.C.Plumpton and Co Ltd, Old Hall Street, Liverpool. On 28/04/1916 he embarked from Southampton for France, disembarking the next day at Havre. He had served a total of 1 year and 185 days at the time of his death. His brother George William Shaw also served in the war as Lieutenant, 1/5th Manchester Regiment. He survived the war. Born 1894 at Crumlin, Belfast to William and Elizabeth Wylie Shaw, of 350, Shankhill Road, Belfast. Thistle Dump Cemetery, High Wood, Longueval, Somme, France. Crumlin Road Methodist Church WM, Belfast

1917

+BOVAIRD, Thomas


+McCULLOUGH, Frederick James

RNAS. Petty Officer. Mechanic. F10028. Armoured Car Division. Second Lieutenant.RFC. 53rd Squadron. – Secondary Unit Royal Garrison Artillery. Died 08/11/1917. After Inst, he attended Queen’s University Belfast, where he studied engineering and was a member of the Officer Training Corps. On 15th November 1915, he was appointed to the Royal Naval Air Service (Russian Armoured Car
Division) as a Petty Officer. He served in Russia under Commander Locker-Lampson before returning home to be commissioned to the Royal Garrison Artillery on 13th October 1916, where he served with the Brigade Head Quarter’s staff in France. He subsequently transferried to the 53rd Squadron Royal Flying Corps, as an observer. Frederick was killed in action on 08/11/1917. A report received from the officer commanding the 10th Loyal North Lancashire Regiment stated that on 15th November: “when in the lines my unit found the bodies of 2 British airmen in “no-man’s land”, they were recovered and buried in the Northern end of Hollebeke Church. A chequebook and letters were found on one of the bodies which showed it to be that of 2nd Lt L W Middleton RFC”. Frederick was born on 27/09/1897, the son of F W and Sara McCullough of Longford Villa, Antrim Road, Belfast, later of “Belgravia”, Ulsterville Avenue, Belfast. His father was the chief engineer for the city of Belfast and president of the Institution of Water Engineers. Frederick’s remains were re-interred in Voormezeele Enclosure Number 3, Flanders, Belgium. RBAI WM, Fitzroy – PCI RH, QUB WM, and QUB Training Corps RH. ADM 188/580/10028

1918

+COARD, S

RNR. Trimmer. 487/SJ. HMT Nellie Dodds. Died 08/11/1918. Aged 35. Husband to Rose Ann Coard, Garston St., Belfast. Carnmoney Cemetery
+COWAN, Matthew


+FARMER, William


+GORDON, Herbert

Royal Irish Rifles, 1st Bnt. Corporal. 9134. Died 08/11/1918. Age 28 years old. Son of John and Mary Gordon, of 4421, Harrison St., Chicago, Illinois, U.S.A. Born at Banbridge, Co.Down. The Hague General Cemetery, Netherlands

+HENRY, James

Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, 6th Bnt. Private. 21849. Died 08/11/1918 three days before the Armistice was signed. Age 26. Born 1893. He enlisted at Finner Camp and from there travelled to the Front. What we know of James’ time at war is recorded in letters that he sent home to Coleraine. There are 121 letters in the collection and 94 postcards dating from 2nd October 1915 to 24th October 1918. These letters leave behind a legacy, not only of James but of the men of
Taylor's Row, Chapel Square, and Coleraine that fought during World War One. They are part of a unique and very special collection. Georgina, James’ sister, kept all his correspondence and passed it down to her children, who very generously donated them to Coleraine Museum. The letters are on www.niarchive.org Son of Alexander and Annabella Henry, of Taylor's Row, Coleraine. James Henry lived in Castleroe before moving to Taylor’s Row. Dourlers Communal Cemetery Extension, France

**+HEWITT, John R**


**+RANKIN, W J**

Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, 5th Bn. Private. 19012. Died 08/11/1918. Age 24. Son of William John and Mary Rankin; husband to Francis Rankin, of 8, Pine St., Waterside, Londonderry. Avesnes-Le-Sec Communal Cemetery Extension, France

**+WOODSIDE, C R**

North Irish Horse. Private. 71563. Died 08/11/1918. Rocquigny – Equancourt Road – British Cemetery, Manancourt, Somme, France
1941

+ERWIN, Thomas Harold


+McCOMBE, George Marshall

RAFVF. Pilot Officer (Pilot). 104492. Died 08/11/1941. Aged 25. 78 Sqdn. Son of George and Mary McCombe; husband of Eileen McCombe, of Castlerock. Gaasterland (Nijemirdum) General Cemetery. Friesland, Netherlands. 502 (Ulster) Squadron WM, St Anne’s Cathedral, Belfast

1942

+CHERRY, Patrick


+Fitzpatrick, William James Joseph

RN. AB. C/JX 192062. Died 08/11/1942. Age 22. HMS Walney. Lost after attack on North African ports. (For note on loss of Walney see entry for Cherry, Patrick, above). William had three years’ service. Son of William and
November 8

Elizabeth Fitzpatrick, Hillview St., Whiteabbey. (Belfast Weekly Telegraph 18/12/1942). Chatham Naval Memorial

1944

+KENNEDY, William

The King’s Regiment (Liverpool), 2 Bn. Private 5382483. Died 08/11/1944. Aged 24. Son of William and Minnie Kennedy, of Moat Terrace, Ballymena; husband to Elizabeth Jane Kennedy. Forli War Cemetery, Italy

+MEADEN, Keith Thomas Stratton


+ORR, Ronald Mervyn

RNVR. Sub-Lieutenant. GM. Sub-Lieutenant 04/08/1944. Posted 28/02/1944 – 10/1944 to Department of Unexploded Bomb Disposal, Admiralty (HMS President) for duty outside Admiralty. 08/11/1944 HMS Royal Edward (port party, Dieppe) – borne on the books of HMS Odyssey, accounting base for naval parties. (There is little in public provenance about HMS Odyssey. Some sources claim it was a hotel in Devon for Combined operations. It is not included in the normal list of ships, nor was it a regular shore establishment.) G M gazetted 13/03/1945. Awarded for port clearance, “for gallantry and undaunted devotion to duty.
November 8


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We will remember them

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The **remembrance ni** programme is overseen by Very Rev Dr Houston McKelvey OBE, QVRM, TD who served as Chaplain to 102 and 105 Regiments Royal Artillery (TA), as Hon. Chaplain to RNR and as Chaplain to the RBL NI area and the Burma Star Association NI. Dr McKelvey is a Past President of Queen’s University Services Club. He may be contacted at houston.mckelvey@btinternet.com

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