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# War Graves in the United Kingdom

Posted: May 24, 2021  
By Community\_Editors

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Each year, individuals make pilgrimages to the former battlefields of the two World Wars to pay their respects to those who made the ultimate sacrifice for their country. However, in light of the Coronavirus pandemic members of the public are now turning to their local area to research those lost in their communities as a result of the conflicts.

There are more than 306,000 casualties buried in the United Kingdom at over 12,000 locations. These can be as small as a single casualty buried in a churchyard, to as large as purpose-built cemeteries that are directly maintained by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC). It is important to note that these sites do not always look exactly like the cemeteries and memorials along the former battlefields – indeed, many of the graves are not owned by the Commission and are marked differently. This post will discuss some of the sites you may see if you visit your local cemetery, and hopefully give you a greater understanding of the work of the Commission in the United Kingdom.

## Reasons for Casualties in the United Kingdom

One of the most common questions I hear when discussing my research is ‘why are there war graves in the United Kingdom?’ There is a widespread assumption that all casualties of the two World Wars are buried overseas, but the reality is much more complicated. In very broad terms, a casualty may be commemorated in the United Kingdom for the following reasons:

- They died of sickness or disease in a military hospital after being repatriated for treatment.
- They died due to training or other accidents whilst in service.
- As a result of enemy action over the UK, such as air raids.
- Killed in action in the air or at sea and their remains were later washed ashore.

There are, of course, exceptions to this rule. However, these four reasons can explain many of the stories found here.

## Cemetery Types

Many of the sites in the United Kingdom are owned, operated and maintained by other individuals, such as local authorities or private companies. However, a few of the sites in the United Kingdom are directly maintained by the Commission themselves. Most notably is Brookwood Military Cemetery in Surrey, which contains more than 5,000 service personnel from across the Commonwealth. In addition, there are casualties from America, Belgium, Czechoslovakia, France, Italy and Poland.



One of the plots at Brookwood Military Cemetery, Surrey (Photo Credit: CWGC)

While there are around 170,000 burials in the United Kingdom, many of them are in cemeteries that are privately maintained – and 90% of sites across the United Kingdom have fewer than 10 war graves. Therefore, it is unlikely that the usual symbols found in larger, Commission-owned sites, such as the Cross of Sacrifice and Stone of Remembrance, will be found in sites across the United Kingdom.

In some sites, you may find a small war graves plot. This is where the casualties of the war have been buried in one place and the area has been constructed to resemble a Commission cemetery, but on a smaller scale. These are generally found with Second World War casualties, such as at Newark-Upon-Trent cemetery in Nottinghamshire, where almost 500 Second World War casualties are commemorated in a designated plot. There are also nearly 50 casualties from the First World War buried at the site.



The war graves plot at Newark-Upon-Trent Cemetery, Nottinghamshire (Photo Credit: CWGC)

### Headstone Types

Commission headstones are one of the most iconic features of a Commonwealth War Graves Commission site, with the white Portland stone often taking centre stage. However, outside of the Western Front a range of stones types are used to mark the graves of the war dead. This includes slate, botticino, stancliffe and granite stones, depending on which would best suit the local climate and availability at the time of commemoration.

Nor are all graves marked with a Commission headstone: over 37,000 graves are marked with private memorials chosen by their loved ones. In cases where a casualty has been commemorated with a private memorial, the CWGC does not own or maintain private memorials but does monitor their condition to ensure that the individual's name is legible. If not, it will liaise with the owners of the grave to mark the grave with a Commission headstone – this used to take the form of a standard headstone, but now is often using a marker type that is typically found on the Gallipoli Peninsula. This is because it requires a smaller foundation and is thus less likely to disturb the grave.



An example of a scattered grave at Melton Mowbray (Thorpe Road) Cemetery, Leicestershire, with Stancliffe stone used for the headstone (Photo Credit: CWGC)

There are memorials to the missing across the United Kingdom, too. Over 130,000 Commonwealth servicemen and women with no known grave are commemorated at these memorials. The most notable of these are the naval memorials at Portsmouth, Plymouth and Chatham and the Air Forces Memorial at Runnymede. Furthermore, there are situations whereby conditions have prevented the marking of individual graves or if a grave is no longer maintainable. In these cases, screen walls are placed in a site to commemorate them. There are over 50 of these in the United Kingdom and Ireland.

#### **Final Thoughts**

The United Kingdom is the final resting place of a large number of Commonwealth war dead and each site is unique in what you will find there. This blog post has aimed to introduce you to some of the features you will see, and hopefully given you an idea of what to expect from a Commission site in the United Kingdom. For more information, do take a look at the CWGC's new campaign 'Our War Graves, Your History.'

**About the author:** Megan is a PhD student at the University of Kent. Her thesis, provisionally titled 'The Commemoration and Care of First World War Dead Buried in the United Kingdom,' highlights the presence of First World War graves in the United Kingdom and explores how these sites of memory conform to and contrast with the cemeteries and memorials found alongside the former battlefields.

Tags: cemetery, First World War, local history, Second World War, war graves