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## Repatriation of a Motor Company Heir

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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', is focused on highlighting the presence of First World War graves in the United Kingdom and how these sites of memory conform to and contrast with the cemeteries and memorials found along the former battlefields.

**While many will be aware of the work of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC) abroad, they may be less familiar with the work of the Commission on British soil.**



Albert Ball VC (IWM Q 69593) | Lt Austin's Grave (Joss Rebera 2020)

Indeed, the CWGC commemorates more than 300,000 casualties at more than 12,000 locations across the United Kingdom, as per their recently-launched 'Our War Graves, Your History' [MK1] project. My research focuses on the presence of First World War graves in England, and how these sites conform to and contrast with the places of pilgrimage abroad. In this piece, I will be concentrating on one of the casualties in Canterbury, Kent, whom is one such example of the individuals remembered here.

### *Why are there War Graves in the United Kingdom?*

As mentioned previously, there is a widespread assumption that the casualties from across the British Empire who fell during the two World Wars are buried overseas. Many may choose to visit the former battlefields across the world, from the Western Front to those found in the Far East. However, the reality is much more complicated. The second highest concentration of casualties commemorated by the CWGC can be found in the United Kingdom, and there are a number of reasons why they can be discovered here. These can largely be divided into four categories, which are:

- 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.
- They died as a result of enemy action over the UK, such as air raids.
- They were killed in action in the air or at sea and their remains were later washed ashore.

Repatriation back to the home country of a casualty serving with the British Empire Forces from the former battlefields was banned from 1915, both on hygienic and logistical grounds. This ban continued after the cessation of hostilities. However, there are always exceptions to the rule. A small number of casualties were repatriated back to the United Kingdom, usually from France and Belgium; these occurred either prior to the repatriation ban, or illegally after this regulation had been enforced. One of the most famous examples is that of Lieutenant William Glynne Charles Gladstone[MK2], the grandson of famous British Prime Minister William Ewart Gladstone. Many of these examples can be found near to the coast, as is the case with the casualty whose story is being highlighted in this article: Lieutenant Vernon James Austin[MK3].

Lieutenant Austin was the son of the founder of the famous Austin Motor Company. Born in Birmingham, he was educated at St Cuthbert's, Malvern Link and the King's School Canterbury. He was commissioned into the Royal Artillery and was killed in action on 26th January 1915 at La Bassée. He is commemorated with a private memorial at Canterbury (St Martin's) Churchyard in Canterbury, Kent[MK4].

Lieutenant Austin's repatriation has been surrounded by some elements of mystery, as alluded to in the recently digitised e-files [MK5] held in the CWGC Archives at Maidenhead. In 1963, the CWGC received a letter from a member of the public who was carrying out research into the life of Lieutenant Austin's father, Lord Austin. In the letter, the enquirer stated that he wanted some clarity on the 'controversy' surrounding Austin's grave. He suggested that there were a number of accounts relating to the repatriation of Lieutenant Austin: one account stated that his remains were brought over to Folkestone and that he was buried at Canterbury shortly afterwards. However, there were rumours that, due to the newly imposed repatriation ban, Lieutenant Austin's coffin was smuggled over in a crate of spare car parts. This rumour has been mythologised over the generations; indeed, the enquirer stated that were it not for the number of eyewitnesses upholding this theory he would not believe it. While the CWGC could not confirm this, as they had no information about the particular circumstances surrounding his repatriation, the e-file makes fascinating reading.

As can be expected of someone from such a famous background, his father knew a number of influential people. Lieutenant Austin's funeral is mentioned by Sir Albert Ball, father of British ace Captain Albert Ball VC DSO\*\* MC [MK6], in his letters to the Commission. Sir Ball wanted to have his own son repatriated back to the United Kingdom, so that he could be buried near to his home in Nottingham. In one letter, he states that one of his closest friends was able to bring their son home, and that 'surely if any boy deserves to be brought home my lad does.' He then went on to state that he personally attended the funeral of Lieutenant Austin at Canterbury. Sadly, his request could not be granted by the Commission. When the CWGC later wrote to Sir Ball, asking for his permission to concentrate his son's grave into Cabaret Rouge British Cemetery [MK7] he stated that, as his son had expressed more than once that he should not like to be moved from his original resting place, he could not approve the request. Furthermore, he added that if his son's remains were to be moved, it would be to bring them home. Captain Ball VC DSO\*\* MC is buried at Annoeullin Communal Cemetery and German Extension [MK8] and is the only Commonwealth First World War casualty commemorated at the site.

There is a suggestion that Lieutenant Austin is buried at Canterbury, rather than near to his family home in Birmingham, due to a pact made among his peers from his school that, should they be killed in action, they all be buried near to each other in the churchyard adjacent to their former school. While this has not been corroborated, this is a possible reason for Lieutenant Austin being interred at Canterbury.

This piece has aimed to show the variety of stories that can be discovered across the United Kingdom. I hope it has encouraged you to visit some of the sites with war graves near to you and to begin your own research into your local casualties.

### ***Further Reading***

'Our War Graves, Your History' <https://www.cwgc.org/our-war-graves-your-history/>

CWGC e-files. <https://www.cwgc.org/find-records/cwgc-archive/efiles/>

[MK1] <https://www.cwgc.org/our-war-graves-your-history/>

[MK2] <https://www.cwgc.org/find-records/find-war-dead/casualty-details/671332/WILLIAM%20GLYNNE%20CHARLES%20GLADSTONE/>

[MK3] <https://www.cwgc.org/find-records/find-war-dead/casualty-details/368703/VERNON%20JAMES%20AUSTIN/>

[MK4] [https://www.cwgc.org/visit-us/find-cemeteries-memorials/cemetery-details/40117/CANTERBURY%20\(ST%20MARTIN\)%20CHURCHYARD/](https://www.cwgc.org/visit-us/find-cemeteries-memorials/cemetery-details/40117/CANTERBURY%20(ST%20MARTIN)%20CHURCHYARD/)

[MK5] <http://archive.cwgc.org/Record.aspx?>

[MK6] <https://www.cwgc.org/find-records/find-war-dead/casualty-details/321879/>

[MK7] <https://www.cwgc.org/visit-us/find-cemeteries-memorials/cemetery-details/64600/CABARET-ROUGE%20BRITISH%20CEMETERY,%20SOUCHEZ/>

[MK8] <https://www.cwgc.org/visit-us/find-cemeteries-memorials/cemetery-details/33203/ANNOEULLIN%20COMMUNAL%20CEMETERY%20AND%20GERMAN%20EXTENSION/>