

CWGC

COMMEMORATING THE PAST
SAFEGUARDING THE FUTURE

COMMEMORATING THE PAST: SAFEGUARDING THE FUTURE



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WAR GRAVES
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INTRODUCTION

The monuments and cemeteries dedicated to the dead of the two world wars have changed little since the conclusion of those conflicts. Indeed, in most circumstances this continuity was part of the promise made to the dead and their families. Nonetheless, in that same period, the societies in which remembrance and commemoration takes place have changed immeasurably, as has the world more generally. In recent years, we have seen the return of armed conflict to the European continent, felt the impact of rampant inflation, and the world is now coming to terms with the fact that we may have done permanent damage to our climate and eco-systems. All these factors throw the time and effort dedicated to commemoration into sharp relief. Furthermore, while the work of war graves organisations across the world was originally driven by the need to provide spaces for mourning and reflection, those most at need of those spaces – the immediate families and loved ones of the fallen – have now largely passed on, too. Despite such seismic changes to the relationship between these commemorative sites, the wider public and the environments in which they exist, the work of the organisations responsible for them has remained largely constant.

With the world wars of the twentieth century now fading from living memory, along with the ties of mourning and grief that gave cemeteries and memorials a clear purpose and meaning, commemorative organisations and the publics they serve find themselves challenged by a number of fundamental questions. How can commemoration be kept alive and relevant for future generations?



Should commemorative organisations change what they do or how they approach their work? Does wider society need to shift the way in which it thinks about commemoration and, if so, what role should commemorative organisations play in that shift?

On Thursday 9 November 2023, days ahead of the annual Remembrance Day events, the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC), in collaboration with the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), hosted an event, 'Commemorating the Past: Safeguarding the Future'. Following presentations and a panel discussion, a group of international war graves organisations, academics and associated experts met to discuss the current state and future of remembrance and commemoration. This report draws together five key themes to emerge from those discussions.

1. NO TIME FOR COMPLACENCY

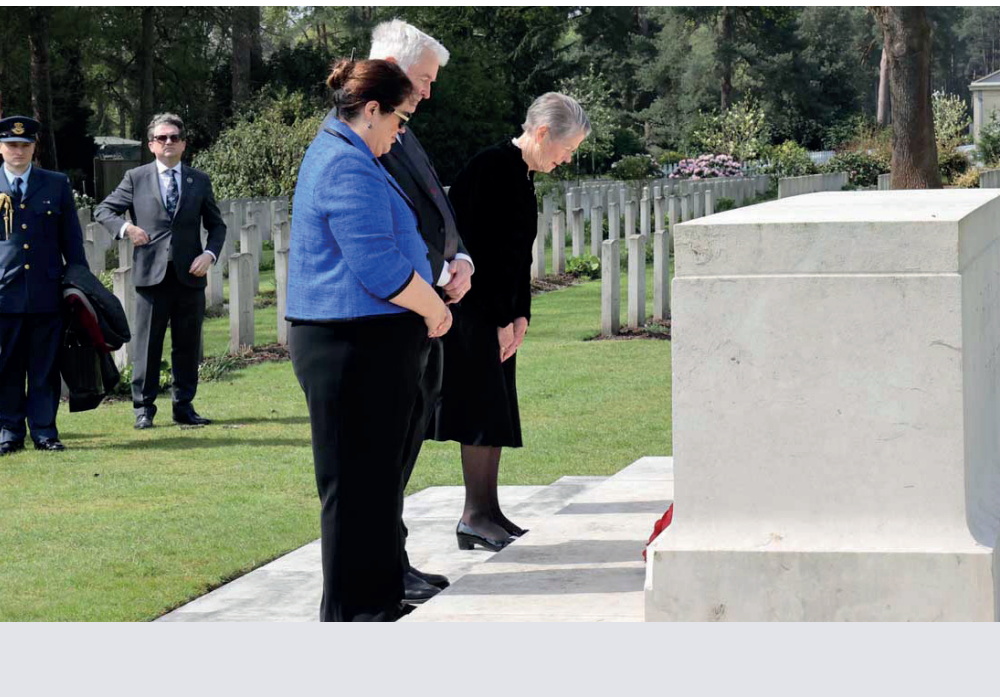


While remembrance and commemoration of the war dead seems deeply rooted in many cultures, particularly in the UK and across the Commonwealth, it can be argued that this happens notwithstanding the existence of commemorative organisations, not because of them. Annually, many nations across the world see state-led commemorative activities on Armistice Day or other nationally significant dates. These are written into the social calendar at a regional and national level, and typically conform to a militarised form of remembrance revolving around the solemn

rituals of wreath laying and momentary silences. Nonetheless, this seemingly unchanging and unchangeable situation should not be seen as a licence for complacency. While the memory of millions of victims of war acts as a moral imperative for many to engage in commemoration, to others, this has – and still does – bring apathy and even controversy.

A long view of commemoration since the First World War clearly shows how attitudes towards these activities across a century have been far from stable. Interest in remembering the war dead of

this and other conflicts has waxed and waned with public and political discourse, perhaps reaching a nadir in the 1960s. Social movements and contemporary politics have utilised this history for their own ends, which at times has dramatically influenced public engagement with the sites of memory and mourning maintained by commemorative organisations. Although the Centenary of the First World War produced a surge of grassroots interest in the war dead and their associated history, this momentum has proved difficult to maintain and not many of the projects associated with it have left significant legacies.



Even with the Centenary of the Second World War now on the distant horizon, the sometimes-fleeting nature of wider public interest in commemoration, alongside historical examples of the negative associations it can also produce, remind us that commemorative organisations cannot be passive in these debates. Attitudes may change, as they have in the past, but the organisations responsible for the care of the war dead and their commemoration need to lead that change rather than react to it.

2. INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATION TO FIND MODERN RELEVANCE



If commemorative organisations are to lead change in ways that are positive for their work and wider society, they need to communicate what they do and explain its ongoing significance. While relevance is naturally a subjective term, and the passage of time and changing attitudes mean it is unlikely to be wholly realised in a static set of activities, principles or beliefs. Connecting with future generations will mean sharing the enormity of the past and explaining why remembering it continues to matter.

Cemeteries and memorials have always been as much for the living as they are for the dead, a fact that has long since provided justification for commemorative organisations to go about their work. Although the passing years prevent us from having the same connection to the men and women of the two world wars, the Centenary of the First World War clearly demonstrated

just how effectively those links could be reestablished and how significant they could be for people's identities. Digitised military records, online communities and formal projects have transformed the citizen historian's ability to research, explore and understand this and later periods of the past. Nonetheless, without encouragement and a framework to support these efforts, they will continue to be episodic and have limited impact.

While certain audiences are likely to maintain an interest in commemoration and remembrance by association and tradition, particularly the military, others will naturally be harder to reach and engage. Schools will remain a primary vector for bringing these sites and events to many, but the centenary also showed the power of more novel approaches to education. Computer games, art, music,

literature and other forms of popular culture featured the war in surprising new ways, and no doubt introduced aspects of this history to new audiences. These must be seen as opportunities or gateways into the topics of remembrance and commemoration, where the weight of this history and the power of the personal stories attached to those lost will hopefully be sufficient to grab people's attention and inspire them to engage further.

Achieving meaningful or lasting reach into these areas is unlikely to be achieved by any institution working alone, which should act as a clarion call for commemorative organisations to collaborate both nationally and internationally to secure a space in people's understanding. It must also be recognised that governments, and particularly departments responsible for education and culture, will need to play an important role in making that happen. These steps would have the added benefit of helping to change the focus of remembrance to include more encompassing narratives of these events, not viewing national stories in isolation but seeing them as part of a shared international experience. At a local level, this offers potentially powerful opportunities to make the process more inclusive and to play a role in creating engaged and active citizens.

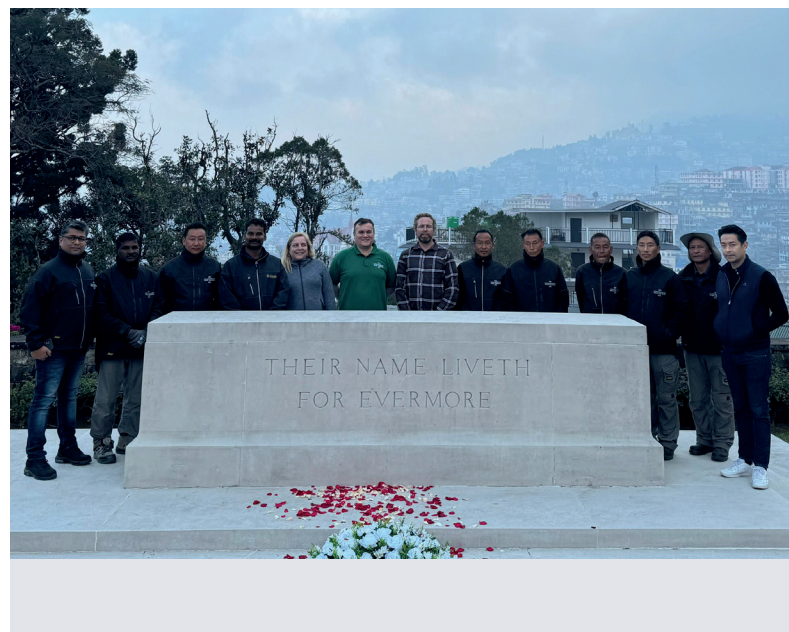
3. ENABLING AND FOSTERING NEW AND DIFFERENT APPROACHES TO REMEMBRANCE AND COMMEMORATION

Perhaps the most significant conclusion on the point of relevance is that remembrance and commemoration need to be interpreted differently by different groups. By way of example, despite the diversity of those who fell fighting for the British Empire in the two world wars, it is very clear that many diaspora communities within the modern United Kingdom feel separated from these sites and events, and possibly even marginalised and excluded by them. For the most part, this can be explained by a general societal ignorance within the United Kingdom of the broad contributions to these wars that came from countries that once made up the British Empire. This is often reinforced by most casual references to the First World War, which typically resort to clichés of the Western Front, thereby excluding the most diverse theatres of war, such as Mesopotamia, the Middle East and East Africa. In the context of the classroom in multi-cultural Britain, there will be many learners who do not see themselves as part of this history, which will naturally have knock-on effects for their feelings about remembrance. The same is true for the Second World War and is no doubt more pronounced in many now independent countries of the former British Empire, where the tradition of remembrance was understandably interwoven with their colonial past. Given the complexity and reach of these wars and those that have come since, similar circumstances undoubtedly exist elsewhere in the world and affect the work of all commemorative organisations.

Helping these and other communities who are not at present positively engaged in remembrance and commemoration may require a completely different approach, and one that cannot be exclusively dictated to them through formal education. Instead, commemorative organisations have a responsibility to connect communities to the people whose memory they preserve. Through outreach and engagement and by embracing technology, they should develop opportunities for collaboration and co-creation, and most of all have a willingness to enable and foster

approaches to these activities that are potentially different to anything we have seen previously. As part of this, they must allow communities to interpret and understand these events from their own perspectives and engage in a way that is meaningful to them. While the intention will always be for these new approaches to be positive, the context of colonialism and other painful histories cannot be denied or ignored in the pursuit of a single or harmonised narrative. While this has the potential to create discomfort for some, this also provides important opportunities for inter-community learning.

As in all aspects of life, disruption can bring change, and while we should enable people to remember and commemorate in a way of their choosing, we should also be helping them to interact and learn from each other. While commemorative organisations should be working to provide an overarching remembrance narrative and generally creating an environment in which new interpretation and engagement is welcomed, a great deal of this work must be done at a grassroots level. The only way in which that will happen is through institutional collaboration and leadership from the sector.



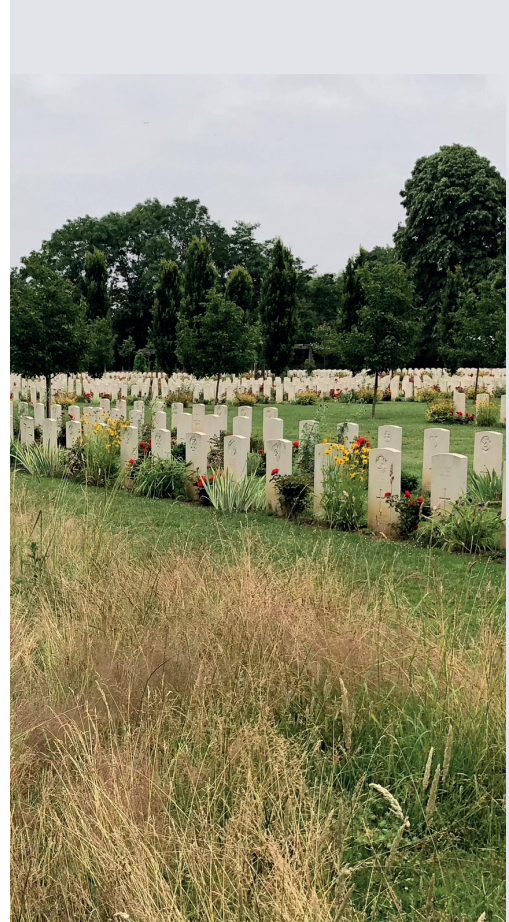
4. SUSTAINING THE TOTAL ENVIRONMENT OF REMEMBRANCE

The natural environment has been intricately entwined with warfare and remembrance forever. The conduct of warfare is affected by terrain, geology and floras; war materiel has long been derived from botanical and animal products, and from bioinspiration. Likewise, the aftermath of warfare – the healing and the commemoration – is moulded by the natural environment and our subsequent interventions. Therefore, the natural environment not only shapes our experiences and modes of action, it is also integral to expressing complex narratives and is an essential part of learning to safeguard our future.

War cemeteries and memorials inhabit almost every conceivable type of climate the world has to offer, but those climates are now rapidly changing, which will significantly affect the way that remembrance is enacted around the globe. Of particular significance is how these changes might affect horticulture, something that has always been used to convey an atmosphere of tranquillity and reflection, as well as provide a sense of place and identity (through, for example, the use of plants representative of specific localities or nations). It is critical that we continually appraise these historical natural features to ensure their continued suitability and sustainability in our changing climates. Where required, we must proactively develop planting and maintenance through new

and environmentally considerate approaches so that we can continue to provide respectful experiences for millions of people worldwide. Long-term preservation might also be secured by having these places of remembrance recognised within the wider heritage landscape, such as UNSECO's bestowing of World Heritage Status upon 51 Commonwealth War Graves Commission sites in 2023, as part of the 139 sites that make up UNESCO's Funerary and Memory Sites of the First World War (Western Front).

Sustainability goes hand-in-hand with the other themes of this document. Commemoration organisations and their partners need to adopt a holistic approach to their work that incorporates healing and renewal, self-care and planet care. Actions towards reduction of resource use, minimising artificial chemicals, understanding the natural capital of the heritage estate, net-zero compliant new builds, adaptation, and enhancing awareness, are all necessary elements in strategies to address sustainability. Moreover, opportunities for greater connection between remembrance and multidisciplinary research should be explored. This is likely to provide direct benefit through mutual learning as well as helping to contribute to wider societal needs, Sustainable Development Goals, and biodiversity conservation through transferable solutions.



5. SECTOR LEADERSHIP WITH CONFIDENCE IN THE FUTURE

If anything was proved by the experience of the Centenary of the First World War it is that such important moments of public reflection require active and timely leadership. In the United Kingdom, the earliest interest in those anniversaries developed as a groundswell, driven more from the bottom up. Interested agencies and institutions were comparatively slow to respond and mobilise, which did not provide the intellectual space required to think about maximizing impact and securing a legacy for this work. With the Centenary of the Second World War now beginning to enter the long-term strategic planning of commemorative organisations, there are clear lessons to be learnt by all those working in the sector, although the pursuit of this influence and interaction need not be restricted to such significant milestones.

At a political level, achieving meaningful engagement is understandably difficult. Governments and their priorities change, and will often be comparatively short-term in outlook. Similarly, the sanctity and familiarity of “Remembrancetide” in the calendars of most politicians and policy makers has the effect of restricting discussions about



these subjects to specific periods of the year. Equally, the international collaboration already called for has the added difficulty of trying to engage governments on differing electoral cycles. Nonetheless, while political discourse and prioritisation can tend towards addressing immediate challenges, the overarching interests and objectives of commemorative organisations are more stable in outlook and can speak to continuity. As a result, a strong and united voice across the sector has the potential to provide a coherent long term global strategy.

Coming together nationally and internationally to raise the profile of the work of remembrance and commemoration not only has the potential to cement the importance of that work but also to demonstrate and promote the diplomatic and cooperative benefits it offers. Through this activity we have the opportunity to provide a neutral space in which to convey a message of peace and unity without glorifying war or opening the wounds of more recent conflict. The value of this has perhaps never been more important.

CONCLUSIONS

This meeting marked the beginning of a conversation about the future of remembrance and commemoration, which naturally could neither cover every aspect of this work nor provide answers to all the questions. While the issues of sustainability and finance were too vast for this session and the time available, they must remain significant points of interest, as much of what was discussed will hinge upon them. Nonetheless, the clear message from this meeting was that the organisations involved have work to do if they are to secure the future of commemoration for the next generation. Though it is generally agreed there is a moral duty to provide a voice for the millions of dead claimed by conflict, to have relevance that voice needs to be heard by an audience. In much the same way, immaculately maintained commemorative sites will become meaningless without visitors and acts of remembrance. As a result, none of this work can be done unthinkingly or in isolation.

How we realise these objectives is still to be determined, but it will be by taking forward what we have learned, not what we have done to date. In that process, we need to bring all affected communities



along with us, but also offer something meaningful to those who cannot directly associate with these events. By collaborating across borders and organisations our collective voice will be louder, and we will have the greatest opportunity to make the largest impact.



**MORE
INFORMATION**

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