



Commonwealth War Graves Commission Presented by Ian Everest

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The Imperial War Graves Commission (IWGC), renamed the Commonwealth War Graves Commission in 1960, is an organisation that most of us are aware of but know relatively little about its formation and operation. Ian's excellent talk and slide show shed much light on this organisation. Family events prompted his interest in the organisation and the subsequent desire to research more of its history.

Prior to the Great War it was the responsibility of individual regiments to look after the graves of the fallen. Most pre C20th fatalities were caused by disease and infection, not as a direct result of enemy action. The condition of the sites depended greatly upon volunteers and site access: the 365 cemeteries in South Africa resulting from the Boer War soon began to fall into decline simply due to their remoteness.

It took the determined and persistent efforts of the journalist and teacher Fabian Ware (1869-1949) to start a process of collecting and recording information of battlefield graves. In September 1914 he went to France with cars and asked volunteers to record all the graves they found. Given the high casualty rate and hence the magnitude of the task, the authorities gave Ware the rank of Major. This reflected the significance of his work when negotiating with other parts of the armed forces, some of whom were particularly dismissive of the need to look after the dead. Ware spoke French and was able to secure land from the French Government on a permanent basis for the purpose of burying and remembering those who had been lost.

In May 1917 the IWGC was formed and also that year the Women's Voluntary Army started helping the maintenance of the graves. A policy was developed not to repatriate the soldiers and to standardise the headstones so that, regardless of rank, everyone's memorial was uniform. This helped put an end to private graves being created with lavish headstones simply because a particular family was able to afford it.

Another of Ware's great skills was to harness the talents of others in the IWGC, such as Edwin Lutyens for the design of headstones and cemeteries and Rudyard Kipling for developing the wording to be used in remembrance. After the Great War a huge effort was made to establish formal cemeteries and by 1920 some 4000 headstones per week, of Portland stone, were being carved. Most was done manually with some companies utilising machinery to speed up the process. The planting of flowers and shrubs along the lines of tombstones and trees in other areas was done with great care, so as to avoid needless repetition and also give the overall impression of an English country garden.

The conflicts that have occurred since, along with the need for repair and maintenance, means that the work of the CWGC is unending; the 23000 cemeteries that hold 1.7million dead require constant attention. Their current budget is around £70million.

Leycester Whewell, EHADPS secretary, 13Mar2015