

## Introduction

Most schools are likely to have a war memorial nearby, dedicated to the 'fallen' of past conflicts. Although some date from before 1914-18, the end of the First World War led to hundreds of new memorials being designed, built and dedicated to those making 'the final sacrifice'. Studying these powerful symbols of remembrance can provide excellent opportunities for studies in History, Art and Geography. These multiple 'messages' in words, images and symbols also provide rich opportunities for reflective RE on remembrance, sacrifice, community, the Bible, and responses to war and peace - and provide the basis for a memorable class study trip.

## Preparation

First, find your local war memorial(s). They may be situated near the geographical or social centre of your community, within the grounds of the local parish church or might even have been moved to a local museum. Some war memorials commemorate particular conflicts, while others remember those from particular regiments or other branches of the armed services. To locate or discover more about your local memorials, the [Imperial War Museum's archive](http://www.imperialwar.com) is a useful starting point. Your school might even have a memorial plaque, dedicated to past pupils.

So once you've found your local war memorial, what next?

First, visit it yourself, taking a few pictures, and noting down any key design elements, texts, images and symbols.

- Does it mention who commissioned or created this memorial, and why? (Some memorials were the gift of one person, whilst others were erected by public subscription. Local historians, newspapers and libraries may be able to tell you more - especially when it comes to tracing the stories of those whose names are set down in stone. A local church may contain a book of remembrance.
- Note the location. What do you think this public artwork is 'saying' to its local community?

Once you've done your research, plan the trip, remembering to follow normal school guidelines for pupil/adult ratios and Health & Safety. It might be wise to check around the staffroom whether any pupils are likely to be disturbed because of known family connections to the armed forces, or other reasons such as a recent bereavement. If that is possible, discuss the trip with individual parents to explain your objectives - and if all else fails, invite them along as helpers. If the memorial is near a graveyard in modern use, be sensitive, keeping near the older parts where the graves are not obviously still tended by families today.

Then, plan a range of study activities appropriate to the age and ability of your class, eg: sketching, taking photographs and noting down key texts or symbols found on the memorial.

- What materials were used in its construction, and why?
- Why do your pupils think this particular place was chosen to site this memorial?

- Does it include a garden or benches nearby, and why?
- What evidence might there be, that people still use this memorial as a place of remembrance?

If possible, prepare a story about one of the people named on the memorial, to bring that person 'alive' for your class, so they are more than simply another name on a list. Perhaps the list includes surnames of people still known to the local community. Alternatively, you could read aloud a short extract from a popular anthology such as *Forgotten Voices of the Great War* by Max Arthur (2003, Ebury Press).

Ensure that your pupils have the chance to record their own feelings or questions about the memorial. If appropriate, you may plan to leave a small token of remembrance yourselves, such as a posy of flowers.

## Development

To prepare your class for the visit, show a picture of the local war memorial you intend to visit, asking if they know where it is or what it's for. Expect some pupils (especially members of uniformed organisations) to know more than others, and encourage them to share their knowledge of what happens at wreath-laying ceremonies on Remembrance Sunday. What questions might they have about this special place? Explain a little (but not too much) about what it is, who created it and why, adding that they will be visiting this place as part of a local study.

Following your visit, feedback any thoughts or impressions - or any surprises, discoveries or further questions. Draw out the meaning of any religious texts or symbols such as the Christian cross, which is a symbol of sacrifice - Christians believe Jesus gave his life so that his followers could live- but it also became a symbol of Jesus overcoming death to win a final victory over the things that wreck and spoil people's lives. What feelings or messages do your pupils think the sculptor of this war memorial would want us to take away, having seen it?

Next, compare an image of your local memorial with images of two other larger war memorials: The Cenotaph in Whitehall, London, and The Response in the city of Newcastle-upon-Tyne.

The Cenotaph was designed by Edwin Lutyens to be a national place of remembrance. Every year on Armistice Day, a vast number of poppy wreaths are laid at its base by representatives of the Royal Family, the British Government, the heads of the armed services, veterans of past conflicts, and many others.

In contrast, *The Response, 1914* stands in central Newcastle, as a public sculpture depicting the response of Tynesiders to the 'call to arms' of 1914. Two drummer boys lead the procession, and further back are scenes of men saying goodbye to their families.

As you display these two larger war memorials, discuss:

- What feelings or messages do the pupils think the sculptors had in mind?

- What did they intend people to feel?
- Are there any obvious religious symbols? Why might this be?

Explain that most of these war memorials were created after the First World War, which until that time, had been the largest war ever fought in the world. Millions of people died, and not just in battle. Many people in this country lost family members and friends during the war- and afterwards, there was a strong public feeling that those killed deserved to be remembered. Many people used the word 'sacrifice' to describe their deaths - meaning they died to serve something good and 'holy'. Their death was a kind of 'offering' to God, or our country itself. (What do they think of this?) As a result, thousands of war memorials like this were designed and built all over the country - to remember 'the fallen'. And like the communities these people came from, the memorials were all different.

Finally, set your pupils one of the following tasks:

- Create a personal 'thank you' symbol (wreath?) to place during an act of remembrance, either at the war memorial itself or in some other public space.
- Create a display (with annotated photos or artwork) on the theme of war and remembrance.
- Design and model a new war memorial for victims of current conflicts in the world: Where would you place it? How big would it be? What would its message be?
- Write and illustrate a poem or short story about war and peace.
- Research the story of how poppies became a symbol of remembrance.
- Recount the story of somebody whose name is on the memorial (if such information is available)
- Interview someone who helps to look after the memorial today.

### **Extension: How do we handle death?**

You may choose to extend this lesson into a discussion of how different people handle bereavement. Again, discuss this first with members of your school's management team. It is important to provide children with a safe place for discussing matters of life and death - this must be done sensitively, with the awareness that at least one of the children in your class is likely to be feeling sad or worried about the death or sickness of a family member. Do not run this lesson as the last session of the day - but instead, make time for at least one break time afterwards, allowing feelings to calm down before 'home time'.

Explain that many people carry around a kind of sadness inside them, because they are worried about someone who is feeling poorly, or they have lost somebody who was precious to them, because of illness or an accident.

- What might people do to remember someone who has died?

Point out that many people decide to do something positive with their sadness - for example, they might set up a charity to help fight a specific illness, or do something to help other people who are



suffering in the same way.

Explain that there are many ways of dealing with grief, and that everyone has to find their own way. At first, some people might be shocked; or they might go numb, feeling 'grey' inside; or they might even feel angry - but that is alright, as long as they don't hurt themselves or anyone else. It's all about gently coming to terms with losing someone you care about - and it usually takes time. The 'pain' doesn't go away completely - but, in time, most people learn to cope. Learning to say 'goodbye' is all part of life.

Show a modern 'sympathy card'. Explain that the card is designed to comfort someone feeling sad, by showing that somebody else cares. Appropriate texts are often a simple 'Thinking of you at this difficult time' but some can contain religious texts or prayers. Set pupils the task of creating a 'sympathy card' for one of the following:

- The family of a soldier who was killed in the First World War (using symbols appropriate to the time).
- A modern-day family who has lost someone precious.
- A family of a modern faith community who has lost someone precious. (Note: Some religious sympathy cards may use symbols appropriate to that faith such as a cross, if the person being sent the card is a Christian.)
- To prevent misunderstandings, do not allow these to be sent home with the children afterwards, except by prior agreement with the School Head.