

# Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - April 2023

## The Commonwealth War Graves Commission - Jane Burrell

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The work of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission was the subject of Jane Burrell's presentation to Wargrave Local History Society in April. She represented the Commonwealth War Graves Foundation, part of the MacRobert Trust, which provides education on the work of the Commission. The Trust had been established by Lady MacRobert, following the loss of her 3 sons in quick succession whilst serving in the RAF during WW2. Her response had been to donate £25,000 to buy a bomber for the RAF – to be known as “MacRobert's Reply” – a tradition still maintained.

Before WW1 those who died on active service were normally buried in common graves, not marked with the names of the deceased. However, in 1914, Fabian Ware, working for the Red Cross in France, became concerned at the lack of recognition of the burial places, often lost as the trenches of warfare moved to and fro. He set about recording the names and locations, and by 1915 gained recognition of the War Office, and the support of the then Prince of Wales. This led to the formation of the Imperial War Graves Commission (IWGC) in 1917, with Fabian Ware in charge. He established its principles, based on equality of treatment - irrespective of rank, creed or colour, the body would be laid to rest close to the place where they died. For those who are buried in one of the military cemeteries, the markers are of a standard style, usually made of Portland stone, with a religious symbol, the name, rank and date of death (where known), and a short personal inscription if the family wished it. For those with no identifiable grave, there were large memorials with stone panels listing each of them. In addition, as it was recognised that many of the family members of the deceased would not be able to visit these overseas memorials, and so memorials such as the Cenotaph in Whitehall were also created. The lives of all who died whilst on military service between 4th August 1914 to 31st August 1921 (for World War 1) or 3rd September 1939 to 31st December 1947 (for World War 2) are commemorated in this way, so including those who subsequently died of their injuries.



The IWGC was renamed as the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC) in 1960, and is responsible for caring for these memorials, world-wide, ensuring the names are kept legible in perpetuity, the grounds tended, and records maintained of each of them. With 1.7 million Commonwealth casualties to be commemorated, the size of the task is immense. Their work is paid for by the Commonwealth governments in proportion to the number of burials from each nation – that is different to the number who died, as the majority of those from India were cremated not buried.

Although the vast majority of the fallen are recorded on these memorials, a few were somehow missed from the Roll of Honour. A project to bring these names “In From the Cold” with more recent research has been able to identify who many of these, and with appropriate evidence their names are submitted to the Commission to be remembered in the same way as those who were recorded at the time. Similarly, where, for example, land in the battlefield area is being redeveloped, the remains of service personnel are still being discovered – as many as 100 per year. The CWGC then arranges for their re-burial in one of the large ‘concentration cemeteries’ (as also happened to those in some small burial grounds), such as Etaples (near the French coast) or Tyne Cot (the largest, in Belgium). The equality of treatment meant that all were buried ‘where they had fallen’, and not returned to their home country – as that would not have been possible for many families to afford to arrange.

The lettering on the memorials was designed by Leslie McDonald Gill, in such a way as they could be seen and clearly read from any angle. Although all the markers were to be made to a standard pattern,



In addition to the 800,00 individual grave markers, the large memorials for those with no known grave contain over 560,000 names, and were designed by various architects including Sir Reginald Blomfield and Sir Edwin Lutyens. The one at Ypres, for example, has 54,000 listed, and the playing of the Last Post is witnessed by large crowds – including groups of schoolchildren who learn of the folly of war. For naval personnel who were lost at sea, there are comparable memorials at Plymouth, Portsmouth and Chatham. For those who died in this country, maybe whilst being treated for injuries sustained on the battlefield, the rules were less stringently applied. Often the family of the deceased would take charge, and they may be laid to rest in a local churchyard or cemetery, or in one of the larger cemeteries such as Brookwood, in Surrey. That might lead to different material being used – in Cornwall, for example, the markers may be made of local slate, but the CWGC also cares for these memorials, to ensure the names remain legible, and not forgotten. All of these are also included on the CWGC register.

Jane’s husband, Philip, then showed how to research those who are remembered in this way, using the names of casualties recorded on Wargrave’s village memorial for his examples. In the case of one of them, the entry in the register had the names in the wrong order – and should be Beatrice Le Blanc Smith. Philip’s research showed that she had been a nurse during World War 2 and as one of the last to flee Singapore as the Japanese approached in February 1942, was one of about 700 passengers on the SS Kuala. A Japanese plane spotted the ship, and bombed it. Many were killed onboard the ship, and others by a continued attack as they swam for a nearby island. Some of the survivors were picked up by the SS Tanjong Pinang – but that was bombed by the Japanese the day after. Beatrice is remembered on the Singapore Memorial. From World War 1, Arthur Alexander Austen-Leigh was a member of the Royal Berkshire Regiment was the son of a vicar of Wargrave. He was killed in France in May 1918, but is one of those with no known grave, and so is

