

# Wargrave Local History Society

## Latest News - January 2006

### The Commonwealth War Graves Commission

The speakers at the January meeting of the Wargrave Local History Society were John Gimblett (a local resident and former member of the CWGC staff) and Ian Small (a current member of CWGC)

John began with 'Wargrave' aspects of war memorials. Our village war memorial, designed by Lutyens, is showing signs of wear and tear. The names on the south-west side - in particular - are somewhat eroded. Although the Royal British Legion likes to be involved, the upkeep is the responsibility of the Parish Council. As the cross is a single piece of stone, it is hoped the names can be re-engraved in situ. Some 15 years ago Dick Worthy had researched all the village war dead, and the details published in a leaflet (and in *The Second Book of Wargrave*). John then mentioned a number of local sites within easy reach, such as Runnymede and Brookwood.

Ian then told us of the history of the Commission. In 1914, Major General Fabian Ware, who commanded a British Red Cross unit in France, noticed that the bodies of casualties were buried by their comrades in an unorganised way, and that this would not stand the test of time. He arranged that the graves that could be identified would be recorded and cared for. His unit became, in 1915, the Graves Registration Commission, and a Royal Charter was granted in 1917, creating the Imperial War Graves Commission. It was renamed in 1960 as the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. Its remit is to provide and care for memorials of all those who died during the two World Wars (defined as from 4th August 1914 - 31st August 1921 and 3rd September 1939 to 31st December 1947 - so including those who died as a result of wounds during the war. The Commission is duty bound to record all the names of those who have a known grave on headstone, and to list on a memorial the names of those who were 'missing'. The underlying principle is of equality of treatment - irrespective of rank, creed or colour. The headstones are of a standard style, although where the next of kin could be contacted, they were able to add a 'personal' note to the foot of the stone, and to add personal details to the entry in the register of the graves.

The Commission's task is vast - on just the first day of the Battle of the Somme 60,000 were killed or wounded. There are 1,695,174 Commonwealth graves, in 149 countries and 23,000 sites for them to care for. If the service- person died in their 'home' country, then the family had the option as to where they would be buried, and so some 170000 rest in 12000 municipal cemeteries and churchyards in this country (otherwise, they are buried close to where they fell). The Commission is responsible for all the war dead, no matter where they died, or even if they died at home due to a flu epidemic or an accident, for example.

The costs - £34 million per year - are born by the Commonwealth nations in proportion to the number of war memorials they have. The upkeep consists of 'horticultural aspects, to maintain the cemetery grounds, and the 'structural' maintenance - ensuring that the names remain legible - 2,500 being re-engraved annually, and about 3,500 replaced.

The Commission receives many enquiries about those who are commemorated on its memorials. Until the mid 1990s, this was about 50,000 a year, by letter or phone. From 1995, the registers were computerised, and when launched on the website in 1998, there were 750,000 'hits' in the first few days - and there are now around 250000 hits per month. Not only has the computerisation allowed for more enquiries, but also enables more complex searches to be undertaken.

Ian then introduced the very moving film 'A Debt of Honour' which showed more of the Commission's work. Their website at <http://www.cwgc.org> has more information, or enables a search to be made of the registers.

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